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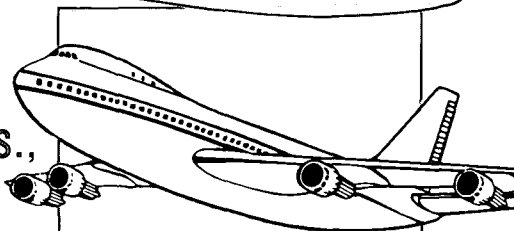
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World's Greatest LOVE STORIES

NOV/DEC 1987 • VOLUME 4 NO. 6

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When Blake Nolan first meets his new neighbor, Lauren Matthews, he decides that her extreme slenderness must be due to a serious illness. And as Blake and Lauren grow closer, he learns just how right he is.

— ANN K. SMITH —

Blake Nolan had started to laugh before he even turned off the ignition in his truck. His sister's two youngest children, ages two and four, came barreling out of the house as soon as they saw him coming down the long pebble stone drive. June, his younger sister, about eight months pregnant, was close behind them.

The stiff April breeze barely ruffled Blake's thick shock of coal black hair when

he dislodged his large body from the cab of the truck and waited until the little ones on their short, stout legs got to him with cries of, "Uncle Blake! Uncle Blake!" In one swift motion he gathered both of them into his arms with no effort and kissed them soundly.

"Hi, kids. And yes, I brought you something," he said before they had a chance to ask. Each child clung to his neck and placed wet kisses on his cheeks. He

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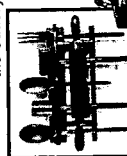
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kissed each of them again with as much enthusiasm.

"What did you bring?" the four-year-old asked.

"Look in the truck," Blake replied as he turned around so that they could see into the bed of the truck. Nestled in a blanket was a tiny puppy, undernourished and sad eyed. "We have to be careful with him because someone wasn't very nice to him," Blake cautioned the children.

He set the children down in the back of the truck so that they could pet the puppy and turned to his sister, giving her a peck on the cheek too.

"Another stray, Blake?" she asked with a smile.

"Abandoned at the site of the new shopping center. What was I to do, Junebug?" he asked, using the childhood nickname and a cajoling tone of voice.

"You're just lucky we have a farm and I have a very understanding husband, you old sofie. Who else would put up with you bringing all these animals home?"

Blake smiled at her and winked one of his sapphire blue eyes. "How is Nathan? Other than frustrated, I mean?" He gave a knowing look at her burgeoning stomach.

June blushed. "He's fine."

"You two still haven't figured out what's causing that, have you?" Blake grinned.

"This is the last one, I promise."

Blake looked at the two-year-old in the truck. "You said that when Alicia was born."

"It's all your fault, Blake Nolan! You were the one who gave us the vacation to Bermuda for a week last September."

Blake continued to grin as he lifted the little ones from the truck and picked up the puppy in the blanket he had provided. They all talked lightheartedly on the way into the house. Familiar with the process

of installing a new animal in the large household, Blake went to the pantry for dog food and got a dish of water for the puppy.

"That should do it," he said, straightening his huge frame from the dog bed by the wood burning stove in the country kitchen.

"If I have kept a correct tally, that is three dogs and two cats you have brought in here," his sister said as she set the table for lunch.

Blake grinned. "I'm trying to keep up with you and Nathan, but somehow you always stay one ahead of me." He was referring to their five children, or six, if you counted her current pregnancy.

"Why don't you get married and start your own animal farm?" she teased lightly.

"I'm getting closer," Blake replied.

June looked startled. "To getting married?"

"No, to having somewhere I can keep all the strays I pick up." Blake moved to the stove and was stirring the homemade soup while they talked. "I think I've found someone interested in the apartment building."

"Oh, Blake, that's good. How about your option on the tract of land?"

"I still have six months to make good on that."

Blake was referring to a large parcel of land that he intended to buy in Fort Wayne, Indiana. It had been his desire to build houses for as long as June could remember and he had carefully plotted and planned for the last ten years how he was going to do it. Little by little, piece by piece, he had bought and sold real estate until he now owned a six-story apartment building in downtown Fort Wayne. When that was sold, he could purchase the farm land he had taken an option on and begin doing what he really wanted.

June looked with fondness at her

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favorite brother. They were a large family, the Nolans, seven brothers and sisters spread out over the United States, working in various careers. Their parents had recently retired and moved to Florida; only Blake and June had remained in Indiana. Blake was the only one not married, which always seemed so strange to June. He was good looking in his own way, tall, with the ample muscular body of a football player.

But it was his pleasant personality that most people admired. He had an incorrigible sense of humor, constantly playing jokes on the children and her, and he was generous to a fault. His kindness extended to others through his charity work with the Jaycees, and being a Big Brother to two young boys. Blake could not stand suffering, whether in animals or people. Of all the Nolan children, he was the one with the soul of a poet, the eye of an artist and a heart of pure gold. Why some woman hadn't snapped him up was beyond June.

"Blake, why *haven't* you gotten married?" June asked solemnly, setting out sandwiches on the trestle table.

"Nobody has ever gotten under my skin, Junebug. You know, like Nathan did yours." Blake grinned at her again. "Although now that I think about it, he got more than just under your skin."

June returned his grin; she was used to his constant references to her pregnancies. "I'll bet in the last ten years you've brought twenty women out here for dinner. Didn't any of them suit you?"

"June, baby, why don't you just give up? I'll find someone, someday." His tone was wistful. He did want to get married, but he wanted love with all its manifestations, and he wouldn't settle for anything less.

"I've got some more books for you to take home, Blake," she said. "Maybe these romances will give you more ideas."

"I don't need any more ideas, Junie. I've already got more romance in my soul than five other guys." June knew that to be true. He was a romantic. Some woman would be awfully lucky to get her brother. Confident with his own masculinity, he read and enjoyed romantic novels. She had ceased to tease him about it any longer.

Nathan came home for lunch, and the three adults and the two children had an enjoyable meal with Blake constantly entertaining all of them. He cautioned the children about being careful with the new puppy before he shook hands with Nathan, kissed his sister and the kids and left to go back to the city.

Ah, it feels good to take a day off, Blake thought as he pulled his pickup truck into the back of the apartment building parking lot. Feeling refreshed from his workout and swim at the Westbrook Club, he had gone shopping and had a bag full of groceries with a fresh loaf of Italian bread sticking out of the top. Life was good.

Blake was whistling as he walked across the parking lot and came up behind one of his neighbors, a young woman who was just moving in. He had seen her when he parked his truck, and, in his sneakered feet, he didn't want to startle her. His blue eyes drifted over her thin figure, noting that she had the kind of shape he liked, if only she had more of it. Her waist was tiny—hardly enough to fill a man's two-hand span—and her hips were fuller, evident even in the pleated, baggy pants. A fashionable oversized top concealed the size of her breasts, but Blake was fascinated with her nonetheless. As she bent to reach into the hatchback car, he noted her blond-streaked brown hair. Definitely interesting.

"Let me help you with that," he said to her back.

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The woman turned quickly. "I can manage, thank you," she said pleasantly.

"Maybe so, but my mother would never forgive me if I didn't help you." He reached for one of the cartons and easily hefted it into his free arm. He grinned into her beautiful cocoa colored eyes. "Why don't you pull your car over to the entrance to make this a little easier?" He had not failed to see that the car was loaded with cartons.

"It says 'No Parking.'"

"It won't hurt to leave it there until we unload this stuff. I'm Blake Nolan, one of your neighbors.;"

"Laurie... Lauren Matthews. But Mr. Nolan..."

Blake gave her a devastating grin. "Mr. Nolan is my father. I'm Blake, Lauren. I live on the top floor. You're in 4B, right?"

Laurie smiled at him. "Yes, but how did you know?" She picked up a lighter carton and began following him to the entrance.

He knew because he owned the apartment building, but he answered, "It was the only vacant apartment."

They chatted lightly up to the double doors which the doorman, Charlie, opened quickly. Blake said hello to the man and asked him to get the elevator. Then he turned to Laurie and asked for her car keys.

"I'll go get the car. Why don't you just sit here for a moment?" He indicated the lobby sofa. Blake thought that she must be either ill or bone tired. Lines of fatigue etched her lovely eyes.

"I can help, really I can," she protested.

Blake smiled. "I don't need for you to help. Just sit there and Charlie and I will get your things. You look tired."

For once, Laurie didn't argue. She was tired, worn out as a matter of fact. Going back to work for the first time this week

and getting her things moved had completely exhausted her.

"How will I repay you?"

This time Blake grinned broadly. "I'll think of something."

As he walked to her car, he wondered about her. She was painfully, unnaturally thin, even though she dressed to compensate for it. Blake knew he wanted to get to know her better. His sister would say he was being drawn to another stray. And perhaps he was. And a pretty one at that.

Blake and Charlie were quick to unload her car, and the cartons were soon piled in the elevator. Riding up, Laurie told him she was the administrator for a social service program for the state and he told her he was a salesman for building materials. Her eyes widened suddenly when he said he was a salesman.

It didn't take Blake long to carry all the boxes to her apartment. When he straightened from placing the last one, he noticed that she had a minimum of furniture in her apartment.

Laurie noted his interest. "I've ordered new furniture to be delivered tomorrow," she explained.

"I'll come help you unpack, if you like."

"No, I can do it."

"I don't mind."

"You've done enough, haven't you? I really appreciate it, Blake," she said, noting his large frame, lightly curled black hair and blue, blue eyes.

Blake looked at his watch. "Will you come up and have dinner with me?"

Laurie looked unnaturally alarmed.

"No, but thank you."

"Why not? I thought you wanted to repay me for my help?"

"I do."

"Then have dinner with me. It's spaghetti and a salad, that's all."

"I'd better not." Still she hesitated.

"Please."

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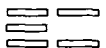
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Her brown eyes were worried or troubled and had just a hint of panic in them. Could she eat with someone like him? Could she eat with *anyone*? She had to face this sometime and now was as good a time as any. It might be better to experiment with a stranger.

"Okay," she sighed.

Blake told her to come up in an hour and bolted for his apartment which he neatened. He barely had time to shower and to prepare the meal before she arrived, looking much better.

Blake Nolan was a big man and ate accordingly. When he served platter-sized plates of spaghetti and meatballs for each of them, he saw the terror in her eyes as she viewed the food.

"What's wrong, Laurie?" he asked immediately.

When her eyes met his, she was speechless, but her expression intuitively told him something. He picked up her plate and went back to the kitchen. When he returned, he had a smaller plate with only a tiny amount of spaghetti and only one meatball. "Is that better?" he asked softly.

Laurie nodded mutely. Finally she said a quiet, "Thank you."

"I forget that everyone doesn't eat like I do."

"Why did you call me Laurie?"

"You just don't strike me as a Lauren. Do you mind?"

"No, Laurie is my given name."

"Then why did you tell me your name was Lauren?"

She hesitated, then blurted out, "My ex-husband thought Laurie was too cutesy. He insisted I be called Lauren."

"Is he a salesman?"

"Yes, but how did you know?"

"I noted your reaction when I told you I was one. Does it bother you to talk about your marriage?" Blake asked, noting that she was only toying with her food.

"Yes, it does. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You aren't hungry?"

"I don't eat very much." Her head was hung low on her chest.

"That's okay, too."

"Thank you for being understanding, Blake."

"You're welcome. Can I fix some coffee for you?"

Laurie nodded and ate a few bites of her salad and spaghetti while he was gone. He led her to the living room while they waited for the coffee to perk. She sat at one end of the sofa, leaning back against a large pillow, and asked about his family. Before he could complete the list of his large family she had fallen asleep. Waiting a few moments for her to be sound asleep, Blake took in all her features.

She wore well applied, flawless makeup, carefully concealing the telltale circles of fatigue under her eyes. He eased her full length onto the sofa and covered her with a comforter he got from his bedroom. As he turned out the living room lights, he whispered, "What has someone done to you, pretty brown eyes?"



When Laurie woke up later, she was embarrassed at falling asleep in Blake's apartment but accepted his teasing with a smile about how boring he must be. She even agreed to let him come down and help her unpack and arrange the furniture the next morning. But she was truly surprised when he showed up at barely eight o'clock carrying a tray full of food and coffee. She opened the door only a tiny bit to talk with him. All he could see were her pretty eyes and the top of her head.

"You can't come in yet, Blake, I'm not dressed."

Blake grinned at her. "You mean you're standing behind that door naked?"

Laurie couldn't help but grin. "No, but all I have on is a sweat suit and I haven't

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put on any makeup. . . .”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Laurie. What I can see of you looks fine and besides, this tray is heavy. Let me in.”

Against her better judgment, Laurie opened the door all the way.

Blake stepped in and turned to look at her. “I think you look adorable in your pink sweat suit with the rabbits on it. And you don’t need any makeup. With eyes like yours, it’s a waste anyhow.” Blake grinned at her and winked one of his smiling blue eyes. “Don’t try to improve on perfection. Hungry this morning?” He didn’t wait for an answer but headed directly to the kitchen.

“Do you always lie so glibly so early in the morning?” she asked with a grin as she watched him assemble the breakfast.

“I don’t lie as a rule. What makes you think you need makeup to unpack boxes?”

“Uh. . . .”

“Your ex-husband again, right?”

“Yes,” she admitted, averting her eyes.

While Blake asked Laurie questions about her job as a social work administrator, he assembled their breakfast of juice, muffins and coffee. On Laurie’s plate he put half a buttered blueberry muffin and on his own two large ones. He was a quick study and was not going to intimidate her with food again. He wasn’t sure just what her problem was, but he knew he had to wait for her to tell him. He suspected it was her ex-husband.

The breakfast complete, they worked steadily unpacking boxes. Moving men arrived before noon with additional furniture. It was late afternoon when everything was in place. Laurie appeared tired.

“How about we go out to dinner tonight?” he asked casually.

“No, I’ll just get something here.”

“Laurie, you have to eat something and you don’t have anything in the house.

Personally, I’m starved. That lunch I threw together seems long gone. Let’s go to dinner.”

“Blake, you’ve been so kind to me but you really don’t want to go to dinner with me. I don’t eat enough to make it worthwhile.”

“Oh. I thought you just didn’t like my spaghetti.”

Quick to respond, she said, “That wasn’t it at all. I’m just very careful about what I eat.”

“Why?”

Panic surfaced in her eyes. Blake reached for her hand and squeezed her thin fingers gently. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

“You’re very understanding.”

“I come from a large family. I’ve learned to be flexible.” He showed her to the sofa and they sat down. “Do you want to tell me about your life?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I’d like to be your friend, Laurie.”

“I appreciate that.”

“Then couldn’t two friends go to dinner?”

“I suppose.”

Blake grinned. “It’s only four o’clock. Why don’t you rest for a couple hours and I’ll be back at seven. We’ve earned a night on the town.” His large hand touched her hair and he smiled at her. “Put on something fancy and the makeup you wanted to put on this morning and we’ll do it up right.”

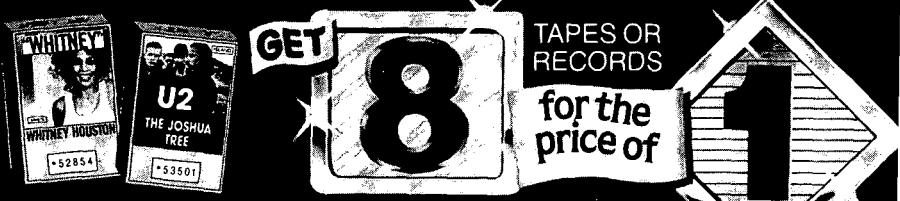
Laurie stiffened but she nodded her head in agreement.

“What have I said wrong now?”

“Nothing.”

“Yes, I have. Half of what I say to you distresses you in some way, Laurie, and I don’t want to upset you. Please tell me what I said.”

“Blake, I don’t know you very well but you’ve been very kind to me in the short time we’ve been friends.” She hesitated



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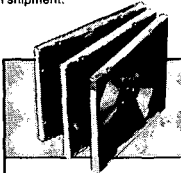
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and Blake could tell that she was thinking over something seriously before telling him.

"Yes?" His quiet voice encouraged her to continue.

"Well, I had a very bad marriage . . . and . . . as a result I have . . . problems with relationships . . . and with . . . eating. Please understand that it's nothing personal. You've been very kind and I appreciate it, but it would be better if . . . if . . ."

"If you didn't see me anymore?"

"Yes." She spoke so softly that he barely heard her.

"What is your problem with eating?"

Tears filled her lovely eyes. "I'm anorexic."

Blake's mind raced to remember what he had read about this disease, but his impressions were cloudy. He knew it was an eating disorder, a desire to be thin, or at least not to be fat, but his thoughts stopped there and he couldn't dredge up anything else.

"Couldn't I just be your friend, with no further demands?" he asked at last.

"Are you sure that's what you want?"

Blake lifted her chin and smiled into her eyes. "That's what I want. I still want you to go to dinner, but let's not dress up. Put on some casual clothes and we'll go for pizza or hamburgers or something. Would that be better?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then you rest for a while and I'll be back at seven."

"Okay. And thanks, Blake."

Blake didn't even go back to his apartment when he left Laurie. He made a beeline for the city library and checked out every book about anorexia nervosa that they had on the shelves. Back in his apartment, he took a quick shower, shaved again and put on jeans and a cotton shirt. He had two hours to find out as

much about Laurie's disease as he could. By the time he went to pick her up, he was much more knowledgeable about her problems.

Blake Nolan was a planner. He knew exactly what he wanted to do with his life, what his goals were and how to get them. He carried over that planning ability to Laurie Matthews. Because it had suddenly become important to him that she be included in his life and he didn't want to scare her away, he called his friend Rosie at Rosie's diner and told her he was bringing in a friend for dinner and that whatever she ordered she was to have in small portions. He explained Laurie's problem in the most elementary of terms to Rosie and thankfully she understood. Blake was a regular at her diner and had helped her out with her grandson on more than one occasion.

The evening was a big success. Blake ate his usual portion of food but Laurie was served a small hamburger and only a smattering of French fries. Talking and teasing all the while, Blake even reached across and took some of Laurie's fries and ate them himself. He noticed that she ate all her hamburger while he talked and that pleased him immensely.

"I enjoyed the evening, Blake," Laurie said later as they left the elevator and walked slowly to her apartment. "I wasn't under any pressure to eat if I didn't want to."

"Have people tried to force you to eat in the past?" he asked casually.

"Just the opposite. Food was a big issue with my husband. He wanted me to be very thin. He thought any fat was abhorrent and showed a lack of self-discipline."

Unexpectedly, Blake laughed. "He wouldn't care for me then, would he?"

"You're not fat!"

"No, but I'm not thin either. I could stand to lose a few pounds, don't you

think?" He was grinning as he asked.

Laurie looked at the man beside her, her eyes taking in the broad shoulders, the wide muscular chest, the solid thighs. "No, I don't think so."

Blake smiled at her and winked. "Good night, Laurie."

"Good night, Blake."

Blake became quite an authority on anorexia nervosa. He read all the articles he could find and he set a plan into motion to help Laurie overcome her anxieties about eating and relationships. Without becoming overly solicitous, he spent the next two weeks becoming her friend. Fortunately, he did not have to travel out of town and he was almost always at his apartment by the time she got home. Casually, and seemingly impromptu, they ate all of their evening meals together. The dinners varied from carry-in pizza to the special at Rosie's to something Blake would cook himself. He made their meals together pleasant with stories of his family, humorous incidents that happened in his job and he filled her in on what he did in his spare time. He never talked about food, or eating, or made mention of what or how much she ate. He had to make a concerted effort to slow his pace of eating to match hers. It sometimes took her more than an hour just to eat an omelet.

Laurie thought that Blake Nolan was one of the nicest men she had ever met. In the short time she had known him, she could determine he was kind, had a terrific sense of humor, and was totally involved in community work. And when she thought about it, he had not mentioned anything about her strange eating habits. When they ate together, she kept her eyes averted from his plate. A man that size had to have large quantities of food, she knew, but the portions he consumed were overwhelming to her.

When he had to travel out of town in

the third week she knew him, Laurie was surprised at how much she missed seeing him in the evening. Her job was bogging her down, and even though she was the administrator, lack of personnel made her have to take on some of the case studies herself. Early in her career, when her life had been happier, the cases had not seemed so terrifying to her. But since her problems with her marriage and her eating disorder, she found other people's social problems upsetting.

She had a big smile for Blake when she stepped off the elevator on Friday night and saw him standing outside her door.

"Hi, brown eyes. How was your week?" he asked with a corresponding grin.

"Busy. And yours?"

Blake could see the tiredness around her eyes. "Routine, and I'm glad to be home. Where shall we go for dinner tonight? That is, if you don't have other plans."

"Honestly, Blake, I'm too tired to go out."

"How about you take a nice long bath and I'll go get us something? Then, after we eat, I'll leave early and you can get some sleep. I'd like for you to go somewhere with me tomorrow."

"Where?"

"I have to help out with the Special Olympics and I'd like for you to go along. Of course, we won't turn down your help either."

"Who's we?"

"The Jaycees."

In a snobbish voice, she said, "Aren't you a little old for that group?"

"No. I can stay in until I'm thirty-five. I'm only thirty-four. What made you say that anyhow?"

"I'm sorry, Blake, really I am. It was just a group that my ex-husband thought was silly."

Blake had suspected as much. "It's

okay. I'll go get the dinner. Take your time with your bath and relax." He smiled into her eyes and touched her cheek lightly with his forefinger. "And don't put on any makeup for me."

Laurie smiled. "Okay." It was a real treat for her to feel that she could be her natural self with Blake. It wasn't the first time she had noticed the difference between her ex-husband, Ted, and Blake.

That summer, through her friendship with Blake, Laurie saw a whole new dimension to the community than she had experienced with her husband.

Blake included her in almost all of his activities. He coached a Farm League baseball team of little boys who weren't skilled enough to play Little League. She noticed his patience with the little ones, his encouraging pep talks and his endless ability to teach them the finer points of playing ball. He asked her to meet him at the field many evenings and later the two of them would catch a bite to eat somewhere. Often they would be joined by his friends and their wives or girlfriends.

At first, Laurie was terrified to eat with the other couples, but again she had Blake to thank for his kindness. He usually guided the group to Rosie's and Laurie never got more there than she could handle. At last she decided to ask Blake about that.

"Blake?" she asked one evening after they were back in her apartment and he was relaxing on the sofa.

"Yes?"

"Why is it that when we go to Rosie's to eat I get such a small portion while you get a full serving?"

Blake had anticipated this question. "A couple of reasons, actually. Rosie is a friend of mine; I have been a Big Brother to her grandson for some years. After you told me you had anorexia, I mentioned to

Rosie that I would be bringing you in and not to load up your plate since you didn't eat much. Also she runs that restaurant on a very tight budget and she doesn't need to serve food to anyone who can't eat all of it. Are you mad at me for doing that?"

Laurie thought that over. "No, I suppose it was just another of your kindnesses."

"Another?"

"Yes, you really are a nice guy, Blake."

Blake looked up at her with his eyes lazy and langurous. Tonight more than any other time since he had known Laurie Matthews he wanted to kiss her.

"Yes, I am a nice guy. Sometimes too damned nice." He hesitated and leaned toward her slightly and then thought better of his actions. "I'd better say good night." Quickly he got up and left her apartment.

Blake wouldn't admit to himself that his feelings for Laurie were rapidly becoming more than friendship until he took her out to his sister's for dinner one Saturday night. Laurie had been apprehensive about meeting some of his family and again eating with strangers.

But Blake, ever cognizant of Laurie's troubles, had forewarned June and Nathan, and relied on them to help Laurie over any hurdles she would encounter. Once there, he showed her the farm, taking her hand and guiding her in between the buildings.

Laurie liked the children, and Blake relinquished her hand so that she could go look at the new puppy with the two youngest. They had proudly displayed the new baby earlier. June had noted the complacent look on Blake's face as he had watched Laurie pick up the newborn. When Laurie was out of earshot, June knowingly looked at her brother with a smile.

"Never had one get under your skin,

huh?"

Blake had the grace to blush and look embarrassed. "What makes you say that?" he stalled.

"You have that same look on your face as when you bring us a new cat or dog."

Instant anger was in his voice. "She's not a stray," he said tersely.

"Sorry, big brother, I didn't mean to strike a nerve."

"I'm sorry, too, Junebug," he was immediately contrite. "I guess I didn't realize that I felt so strongly about her."

June laughed and put her palm to his cheek. "Then you'd better get that smirking look off your face whenever you look at her."

"It's that obvious, is it?" he countered.

June watched the flush creep up his neck again. "She's very lucky, Blake."

"I hope so," he said thoughtfully.

In July Blake took Laurie to the Three Rivers Festival, Fort Wayne's big event of the summer. It pleased him to watch her enjoy the crafts displays, the art show and the various exhibits. He stopped and bought food from a variety of vendors and teased and cajoled her into trying some of everything he bought, often feeding and teasing her at the same time. He insisted she try the elephant ears, large pieces of fried dough covered with cinnamon sugar. When she finished eating two of them, he couldn't have been happier.

"You know, Blake, you've showed me a side to this city I never dreamed was here."

"They have this festival every year. How long have you lived here?"

"Nine years."

"And you never came?"

"No, Ted thought this kind of thing was plebeian. Too common for him." They had bought drinks and were resting temporarily on the grass in the shade.

"When are you going to tell me something about him, Laurie?"

Sadness crossed her face. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything. Anything. I've figured out he had to be at the base of your problems. He was, wasn't he?"

"I suppose."

"Why did you marry him?"

She gave Blake a small smile. "That one is easy. He was everything I had never had, seen or been. I grew up in a small town in Kentucky, went to college while I lived at home and met Ted soon after I started working. He was older, had money, experience and a certain worldliness that I had never come across. He promised me travel, money and a lifestyle I had only dreamed about."

"Did he make good on his promises?"

"The material ones, yes."

"Did you love him?" This answer was more important to Blake than he had realized.

"I was fascinated by him."

"What went wrong?"

"Everything. It just took me a long time to realize what a mistake I had made. And by that time it was too late, all the damage was done."

"You mean your anorexia?"

"Yes, and my nerves were shot. I virtually had a nervous breakdown." She chanced a look at him to see his reaction.

Blake's hand reached out for hers and he gently rubbed his thumb over her knuckles, silently encouraging her to continue.

"What kind of man was he?"

"A social climber of the first order. He spent hours thinking of ways to be 'somebody.' He wanted us to be the perfect couple—a real life Ken and Barbie. We were yuppies, both of us had good jobs and made excellent money. We both drove Mercedes and belonged to the right clubs. Except for the Westbrook

Club. He never could manage a membership in that."

Suddenly she looked up into Blake's face and saw his grin.

"What's so humorous about that?"

"I'm a member of the Westbrook Club."

Laurie returned his smile. Sensing a diversion to keep her from talking about herself and her problems with her ex-husband, she quickly asked, "What's the lure of the Westbrook Club, anyway?"

Realizing her ploy, Blake answered, "It's rather an anachronism in this day and age, but it serves some useful purpose, I suppose. It's an exclusive men's club and one has to be voted in as a member. There is a rather odd bonding of these men who get together for exercise in the gym, a certain camaraderie of financial wizards and other businessmen. It boasts a four-star restaurant where ladies are allowed only for lunch on Saturdays and dinner on Sunday." Blake smiled at Laurie and winked at her.

"It's one of the last truly male bastions. My grandfather was one of the charter members and a Nolan has always been a member. Socially, it is a mark of achievement for rising young executives. Personally, I use their gym a couple of times a week, play an occasional game of poker and conduct a little business in the bar from time to time. If you'd like to go there for dinner some Sunday, we could do that. From everything you have said about Ted Lynch, I can see why he would aspire to be a member." Blake skillfully brought the conversation back to where it was before.

"Well, Ted was never voted in and that rankled him."

"Tell me more about your life," Blake probed.

"We took jet set vacations. I've been to Club Med, all over Europe, Cannes, St. Mortiz to ski—Aspen was just too com-

mon for Ted—and all of the 'in' spots in Mexico and the Caribbean."

"How did he treat you?"

"It's hard for me to describe. At first, I was flattered that he wanted to shower me with fine clothing and jewelry and furs. I know this must seem impossible to you, but it was years before I realized that the reason he went shopping with me was to pick out my clothes so that I wouldn't embarrass him. He spent money lavishly on me and he had the stronger will so I inevitably acquiesced to his wishes about everything—cars, my clothes and the house furnishings. He liked everything sleek and modern. Our house was ultra contemporary." She stared out into the distance, remembering. "I never really liked it. I like colonial things."

Blake could sense that she was coming to the end of what she would tell him. "What did the two of you talk about?"

"We were seldom alone to talk about anything. He traveled a lot on his job, and the weekends were jam-packed with social activities. We had to play tennis at certain times to be seen, and we always ate out. Whenever we entertained, it was catered, and Ted made all the arrangements. We more or less lived just on the surface with each other." She was silent for a long time and Blake continued to hold her hand gently.

There was so much she still hadn't said about her marriage. He was curious about their love relationship but knew he couldn't ask. This was the first time she had opened to him and he didn't want to blow it now. Finally she began speaking again.

"The last two years of our marriage were complicated by his mother. She was widowed and came to live with us. It was easy for me to see where Ted got his ideas. She was a real witch, constantly finding fault with everything I did. Ted sided with her on every issue against me. She harped

at me constantly about my weight."

She looked at Blake and gave a tiny, sad smile. "I was much heavier then, but not what anyone would consider fat. She and Ted ganged up on me every time I put anything in my mouth. Mealtimes became battles, and I soon began to think the effort wasn't worth it."

"They must have really been unkind to you," Blake commiserated, feeling anger and sadness at the way Laurie had been treated. He reached for her other hand.

"I wish I'd had a friend like you then, Blake. Maybe if I'd had someone to talk to, I could have put all of it in perspective."

Blake thought that it was probably lucky that he hadn't known her or her husband then. The anger that he felt at what had been done to her would have made him want to kill Ted Lynch.

"What about your family? Your parents or your sister?"

"Oh, Ted had long since alienated them. They were just too country for him, a real embarrassment. Finally my family got the message. They stopped coming to visit and telephone calls became more infrequent. He was rude to them on the few occasions we had to see them." Tears filled her eyes. "I may never get back on an equal footing with my sister. My parents, or my mother at least, have sympathy for me. I never have been very close to my father. He is a rather reserved person so Ted never bothered him too much."

"What made you see the light?"

"Eventually it was my health. Ted insisted we diet and exercise all the time and eating out with him became a real chore. He was the type of man who enjoyed scenes in restaurants. I have seen him send a martini back as many as three times and the wine never suited him." She shuddered. "It got so bad that I just steeled myself for the disruption and became too nervous to eat. It was the combination of

being criticized for whatever I ate and the scenes and the constant push to be thin that finally did me in. After a while I *couldn't* eat and began to lose weight rapidly. Then I got sick and he had no tolerance for that."

Blake leaned against a tree and motioned for her to lean back against him. Ever so lightly he put his arm around her and settled her against him. It was at that moment that he determined to shelter her from all hurt forever.

"How could he not tolerate your being sick?" he said softly.

"I couldn't dress up and be his date. It was a sign of weakness to him not to be in control of myself. I was hospitalized for two months. At the time they didn't know what was wrong with me."

"What did he say to you when he came to visit?"

Laurie was silent for too long.

"Laurie?"

Blake could hear the tears in her voice. "He didn't come to visit."

Incredulously Blake said, "Not ever?"

"No. I called my mother and she came when I was to be discharged."

"What happened then?" This was becoming more fantastic to Blake by the moment.

"When she took me home, all the locks had been changed at the house. We had to go to a motel. He had transferred most of our savings into his name. It took a court order to even allow me back in to get my personal belongings. All I got out of the marriage was my equity in the house in the form of a cash settlement. But all I wanted at that point was out. I was very ill and went to Florida with my parents for six months."

Blake put his other arm around her and hugged her to him. "Life hasn't been very kind to you, has it?"

"But I survived. And I will survive. It may take me years to get back to my

regular weight but at least now I know that I can do it. I never thought I wanted to live alone, but it is infinitely preferable to being with someone like Ted. I no longer trust my judgment of people like I use to."

"Laurie, all men aren't like him."

"I realize that, but there might be a flaw in my character that makes me attracted to men like that. My father is a cold person, my sister married a man that is similar and so did I. I am just not willing to take a chance again."

"You don't want a family?"

"I did at one time. But I don't think it's the life for me."

Blake didn't pursue the subject as he rose and pulled her to her feet. Talking about her marriage had completely drained Laurie. Keeping his arm around her, Blake led her to his car and took her home.

Once in her apartment, he settled her on the sofa and covered her with an afghan. She was asleep immediately. Blake kissed her on the cheek and watched her sleep for a long time. Every empathetic bone in his body felt for her. She was such a gentle person and had been so mistreated, ignored first by her father and then wronged by her husband.

The outrage of it settled on Blake. It would be quite a responsibility to make up for what those other men had done. If nothing else, he could keep Ted Lynch from ever getting into the Westbrook Club. It was a minor item, but one Blake Nolan would take great pleasure in.

One day in late July Laurie decided that she wanted to paint her apartment. Although it had been freshly painted with the standard "realtor's white" before she moved in, Laurie wanted to change the colors. She asked the building superintendent if she could, although she could have asked Blake if she had known he owned

the building, a fact that he still hadn't disclosed. Given the approval, she told Blake what she planned to do. In his usual way, he insisted on helping her.

Armed with dropcloths, paint, brushes and rollers, the two of them spent one Friday night moving the furniture to the middle of the living room and preparing the walls for the paint. They were going to get an early start on Saturday morning and be finished by Sunday afternoon at the latest.

Early on Saturday, the central air conditioning in the building malfunctioned. Although repairmen were working to correct the problem, the apartments were stifling. Blake had come to paint in blue jean cutoffs, sneakers and a stained T-shirt. Laurie wore slacks and an overblouse. By mid-morning, Blake had removed his shirt and Laurie had changed into shorts and a loose sun top that came barely to her midriff.

Blake's blue eyes took in the attractive picture she made in the abbreviated outfit. She had gained weight, although she was still too thin, and Blake remarked that she looked sexy. She laughed lightly, blushed and turned to work on another wall so that she didn't have to look at him.

She didn't know why it had taken her so long to observe him as an attractive man. But without his shirt and with the broad expanse of his curly haired chest, she was suddenly very aware of him. And her cocoa brown eyes liked what she saw. Too much.

Perspiration had trickled down between Laurie's breasts and left moist stains on her yellow top. The heat in the apartment had caused wisps of her fine brown hair to stick to her temples and cheeks. The heat had also flushed her face. Blake caught sight of her and wondered if that was what she would look like after making love. It was that thought that spurred him to action when the

doorbell rang and Laurie went to answer it.

Blake was still rolling pale salmon colored paint on one wall when he heard Laurie's startled voice from the alcove at the entrance of the apartment.

"Ted! What are you doing here?"

Blake could imagine the scenario at the door when he listened to Ted Lynch's next words.

"My God, Lauren! You look horrible. You don't have on any makeup and your clothes are atrocious. Have you forgotten everything that I tried to teach you?" Ted Lynch's voice was scathing and he talked to Laurie as if she were a recalcitrant child.

"I...I...was...just..." Blake heard her begin to explain.

"Don't waste my time, Lauren," he interrupted rudely. "I have some papers for you to sign about the securities that have matured. Let's get on with it so I don't have to look at you any longer than necessary. Let's go sit in there."

Blake evaluated the situation quickly. That bastard! To come in here and ridicule Laurie like that!

With a flash of humor and an unmistakable desire to set Ted Lynch on his mettle, Blake looked around the room. Moving quickly, Blake took off his shoes and positioned himself on the sofa. They had run out of dropcloths the night before and Laurie had put an old cotton quilt over the sofa to keep it from getting paint on it. Blake pulled the quilt over his cutoffs, creating the illusion that he was naked underneath, with only his bare chest and bare legs exposed.

He spotted Laurie's sandals under the coffee table and artfully arranged them on the sofa with him, one flat on a cushion and the other looking as if it had been tossed up against the back. As a final measure, he ruffled his own hair, pinched his cheeks hard to redden them con-

siderably and half closed his eyes just as Ted Lynch barged into the room.

"Laurie, honey," Blake murmured seductively, "come back over here." Blake extended a hand in the direction of Ted Lynch.

Just as Ted muttered "Who is *this*?" Laurie stepped into the room. Blake had no time to warn her to go along with him so he carried the ball alone.

Looking first at Laurie and seeing her beautiful brown eyes turn round with surprise, Blake blithely opened his eyes and stared at Ted Lynch.

"Oh, sorry, I thought you were Laurie." Blake sat up on the sofa, running his fingers through his hair distractedly, but careful to keep the quilt covering his shorts. Man to man, he looked Lynch directly in the eye.

"You seem to have come at an awkward moment. You'll have to excuse me for not having...uh...not being...uh..." Blake extended his hand but didn't get up. "I'm Blake Nolan."

Totally stunned, Ted Lynch, ever the salesman, reached for, and shook Blake's hand. "Ted Lynch."

Uncertain what she could or should do, Laurie stood behind Ted silently, trying to figure out what Blake was doing. And why. Suddenly it dawned on her. He was having a good joke at Ted's expense! A small smile tilted her lips, and the hurt she had suffered from Ted Lynch's rudeness and crass remarks disappeared.

Blake saw the smile. It was all he needed.

"You must be Laurie's ex-husband," Blake surmised.

"Yes...Yes, I am. And who are you?"

Blake looked surprised. "Didn't I just say I was Blake Nolan?"

"Yes."

"Well, that hasn't changed. Laurie, darling, come over here and sit beside me. You look tired." His tone was so soft and

so concerned. Without thought, Laurie went to sit on the sofa. Before she could sit too far away from him, Blake reached for her arm and pulled her gently down right beside him. His arm went around her shoulders and he drew her to him, kissing her cheek gently.

"Lynch, do you have business with Laurie? If so, I'd appreciate it if you could speed it up." He positively glowed at Laurie. "We were right in the middle of something here, if you know what I mean." He gave a fatuous grin to Ted Lynch, who had stood staring immobile all this time. "Cat got your tongue, Lynch?"

Ted Lynch got a grip on himself at last. "This is rather surprising, Lauren, to say the least."

Gathering courage from Blake, Laurie said, "What do you have for me to sign, Ted?"

Ted extended the papers to her and pointed out where she should sign. Blake squeezed her shoulders when he noticed her trembling. "It's okay, sweetheart," he whispered in her ear so that Ted couldn't hear.

"What was that?" Ted inquired of Blake.

Blake gave him a cagey look and a diabolical grin. "I really don't think you want to know."

Blake noticed that Laurie had finished with the papers and was handing them back to Ted. In a huge sweep of one arm, Blake glanced at his watch. "If you'll excuse us, Lynch, we have less than an hour to change our clothes and get to the Westbrook Club for lunch. Nice to have met you." Blake dismissed the man.

All else that was going on in that room—the affection of Blake for Laurie, the innuendoes of what they had been doing before he came in—disappeared for Ted Lynch. He zeroed in on the Westbrook Club. "You're a member of

the Westbrook Club?" he asked haughtily.

Blake smiled. "Of course. Have been for years. Aren't you?"

Ted Lynch was so angry he didn't reply. He snatched the papers from Laurie's hand and stomped out the door, slamming it loudly behind him.

Blake covered his mouth with his hand to stifle his laughter until he was sure Ted Lynch was out of earshot. Then he circled his other arm around Laurie and hugged her tightly. Both of them laughed until tears ran down her cheeks.

"What a buffoon he is, Laurie," Blake said through his laughter. "How did you stand *that* for nine years?" Blake laughed again as he pulled himself up and imitated her ex-husband, "'You're a member of the Westbrook Club?'"

"Oh, Blake... it was so... funny," she began with laughter, but it quickly dissolved into real tears.

Blake was instantly down on his knees on the floor in front of her. Ever so gently, he put both arms around her and pulled her head into his chest.

"Honey, Laurie, baby, don't cry," he soothed. "You're all right, he's gone... baby, don't cry." But it was all for naught; cries wracked her body.

Blake easily picked her up and held her in his arms. When he sat back down, he settled her on his lap and tucked her head into his chest. He could feel her breathless gasps against his neck. Gathering the quilt with one hand, he drew it around her. She was so emotional that she had started to shiver even with the unusual heat in the room.

Quietly he soothed, petted and comforted her but he gave up asking her to stop crying; she probably needed the catharsis. Even when she had cried herself out, Blake continued to hold her. Once the tears had stopped and she was breathing normally, she tentatively put

one arm across his chest and down to his waist. Almost instantly, she heaved a sigh and was asleep. Blake knew he should take her to her bed, but he wanted to hold her too much.

Soon after she fell asleep, Blake heard the air conditioning come on and the room began to cool. He drew the quilt more securely around Laurie, not wanting her to get a chill. The way she slept amazed him; she had not moved, not an arm or a leg. Even with all his experience with his nieces and nephews falling asleep on him, he had never known anyone to sleep so soundly. He grinned; there was no way he could object, however, because he had wanted Laurie in his arms for ages. He wouldn't have chosen these circumstances, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

It was almost two hours before Laurie stirred, and then it was to nestle closer to him.

"You're so comfortable, Blake. All warm and cuddly," she whispered into his neck.

"You make me sound like a bear." She could hear the laughter in his voice and she giggled.

"I can't feel my bones when I'm up against you."

"What you're saying is, I'm fat."

Laurie pulled away from him. "Oh, no, I didn't mean that! Just nicely padded." She started to move off his lap.

"No, don't move, Laurie. I like your bones against my padding. I could get wonderfully used to having a pretty lady in my arms like this."

"You could?"

"I could." Blake knew he had to lighten the moment. "If you think of me as a bear, then you won't mind if I give you a big bear hug, will you?" And he tightened his arms around her.

When he loosened the pressure of his arms, she sat up and looked at him quizzically. "Why are we sitting like this?"

"Because it's comfortable, you just said so. Put your head back down here and tell me why you cried." He gently encouraged her to lay back down on his broad shoulder. A ripple of desire surged through him when she laid her hand on his bare chest and threaded her fingers into the furry black hair.

"It was the first time I've seen him since the divorce, and I guess it was just unnerving."

"Is that all?"

Laurie was silent for a long time. Blake was such a good friend, so understanding and so nice. She knew she could tell him anything. "No, it's my job, too."

This was not news to Blake. When they had talked about her work over meals in the past, she had told him of the problems she had to face. The administrative portion of her work caused her no anxiety, but the turmoil caused by handling cases disturbed her. She had not admitted that to him in so many words, but he could read between the lines.

"What about your job?" he questioned softly. If she wanted to talk about it, he wanted to listen.

"I'm not handling it very well," she said, still in a whisper.

"The cases?"

"Yes. I used to be able to deal with other people's problems, but I find it very difficult now." She sighed heavily. "I don't want to be a failure, Blake."

"Maybe you should consider some other line of work."

Laurie arched away from him. "Like what?"

"You'd make one hell of a good interior decorator, Laurie. Look what you did with this apartment, even before we started painting."

She smiled ruefully. "An interior decorator? Me? You've got to be kidding!"

"I'm not kidding. You transformed

this dull apartment with fabrics and textures into a cozy little home. You could do that for other people, if you tried."

"Blake, I have a Master's Degree in Social Work. It's all I've ever done. I can't give up now. It's the only way I know how to support myself and to make money." She slid off his lap and moved away from him.

"Money isn't everything, Laurie."

"It is if you have the bills to pay that I have. Among the other things Ted did was to take me off his health insurance policy. I owe for all those weeks in the hospital."

Blake had his usual malicious thoughts about Ted Lynch before he considered what else could be bothering Laurie.

"Are you afraid you'd consider yourself a failure if you did change careers?"

"Well, I would be a failure, wouldn't I?"

"In whose eyes?"

"Everyone's."

"Aha! The ubiquitous 'they,'" he said laughingly. "'They say,' 'they think.'" His face was serious. "'They' shouldn't have anything to do with it, Laurie. It's what *you* think that is important, don't you know that?"

Uncertainly, she said, "I suppose I do."

"But you're not sure?"

For some reason, Blake's attitude angered her. "I'm not naive, Blake. I'm an adult, just like you are, and I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't talk down to me." She stood and gravitated to her paint tray. With deliberate actions, she jabbed the roller into the paint.

"Wait a minute, Laurie," Blake was quick to respond, "I wasn't talking down to you, I was only pointing out a basic fact."

"But..."

"Let me finish. You said Ted didn't

want you to embarrass him with your clothes and other things. He obviously wasn't smart enough to realize that no one can embarrass someone else. Only *you* can embarrass *you*. And if you carry that philosophy over into the rest of your life, then it shouldn't make a tinker's damn to anyone else what you have as a career, as long as *you're* happy with it."

"But what about my education? How would I explain that to anyone? Not using it, I mean?"

"Who do you have to explain it to, Laurie? And why?"

"Well... my parents, for one."

"Did they pay for your education?"

"No, I went to college on scholarships. And I got my Master's Degree after I was married."

"I'm sure they would want you to be happy, Laurie, if they love you and I'm sure they do. If that meant a career change, then so be it; they would understand."

Laurie didn't respond right away. She rolled the paint on the wall slowly, thinking over what Blake had said. Getting no response, Blake went back to his painting, too. The silence in the room was tense. Both of them were thinking that it was the first difference of opinion they'd had.

"Blake?"

"Yes?"

"I spent nine long years being concerned about what other people thought. I was naive when I married Ted Lynch and he taught me carefully. It might take me a while to get over it, but I'm sorry I lashed out at you."

Blake left his painting and walked to her, putting his large hands on her bony shoulders and turning her to face him. His mouth curved into an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, too, brown eyes. I just wanted you to know that you had other alternatives. Forgive me for being so pushy?"

Laurie smiled. "Of course. What are friends for?" Her hands hovered tentatively at his waist, but she didn't touch him.

They stood for long moments without speaking, both of them feeling the sexual tension. Blake wanted to haul her into his arms and hug her fiercely; Laurie longed for the comfort she had experienced earlier in his arms. But each realized it was a step they were not ready to take. Garnering his control, Blake only squeezed her shoulders gently, then backed away from her.

In a husky voice, he said, "We'd better get on with the painting if we want to finish by tomorrow."

Laurie quickly turned away from him and Blake left the apartment on the pretense of going to his own to get them a bite of lunch. But before he made sandwiches he took a cold shower.



The situation between Laurie and Blake reverted to normal. Her apartment was fully painted and they ate their evening meals together frequently for the first two weeks in August. Laurie began negotiations with a head hunter employment agency to find her a true administrative job. Blake had another intersted party making noises about buying his apartment building after the first offer had fallen through. With only two more months to pick up his option on the farm land, he was getting anxious and more than a bit edgy. But he was careful not to alter his dealings with Laurie.

Blake spent most of his driving time on the road thinking of Laurie and how he could gently move their friendship to another plateau. He decided on a romantic evening at his apartment. Taking that Friday off from work, he carefully planned a menu of what he knew to be Laurie's favorite foods, if that in itself wasn't a contradiction in terms. She had

improved in her eating habits, had even gained some weight, but she was still skittish about mealtime. All that he took into account.

Late in the afternoon, he was checking everything. Soft music from a tape deck, flowers and candles for the table. No candles. Well, he had plenty of time before Laurie came up. He glanced at his watch. It was time for her to be home from work. A swift look into the parking lot from his living room window told him that her car wasn't there. Thinking that it was a little strange for her to be late, he left to buy the candles.

Blake knew of a small shopping center nearby that had a card and gift shop. He decided to try there since it was in the direction of Laurie's office building and maybe he would see her on her way home.

As traffic slowed near an intersection and then came to a complete stop, Blake had a bad vibe about the accident he caught a glimpse of ahead. He could see the twirling lights of a police cruiser and could hear the ever-nearing wail of an ambulance siren. Some sixth sense compelled him to get closer to the scene of the accident.

He jammed on the emergency brake and put the truck in neutral before bounding out of the door. With a sprint that a long distance runner would be proud of, he hastily ran to the intersection. There was a confusion of spectators and police, but Blake's eyes swiftly spotted the cars that had been involved in the rush hour accident.

One of them was Laurie's.

Rapidly his intense blue eyes scanned the crowd. Where was she? He was trying not to panic, for that wasn't in his nature, but all he could think about was all the things he hadn't said to her that he wanted to.

Just as he was engulfed with these thoughts, he saw her being led to a police

cruiser by a man. His feet moved toward her of their own volition, cutting through the onlookers with blind intent. As he neared the car, he identified the man.

Lynch!

What the hell was he doing here? But Blake spared only an idle thought for the man; his concern was for Laurie and he moved quickly toward her in time to hear Ted Lynch upbraiding her. Anger such as Blake had never experienced suffused him as he listened to the scathing words.

"Lauren, for God's sake, straighten yourself up!" Lynch admonished. He had taken hold of her linen suit jacket by the shoulder and was neatening her blouse with one hand while the other was pulling the hem of her skirt down from where it had ridden up to her thigh. "You're a mess! Get yourself under control!" His tone was demanding and merciless.

Blake's eyes ascertained that Laurie had not been hurt, only rattled by the accident. She was a bit disheveled looking, and was crying uncontrollably in big gasping sobs.

"Lauren!..." Ted Lynch began again.

"Enough, Lynch," Blake said in steely tones. "Get your hands off her. Now!" Blake was adamant in his demand.

Ted Lynch looked up at the hulking form of Blake Nolan that had materialized beside him. "She's making a spectacle of herself..." he began.

Blake didn't even listen to Ted Lynch. He cupped Laurie's face in his large, gentle hands, trapping tendrils of her hair against her cheeks. "Laurie, honey, are you all right?" he asked quietly.

Unbidden, her arms went around Blake's neck just as he saw the relief in her eyes. In a fluid motion, Blake put one arm under her knees and lifted her into his arms. He felt her clutch his neck and bury her face into the hollow of his shoulder.

"You're okay, Laurie, you're okay,"

he reassured. "I'm going to take you home myself." His voice was calm as he carried her to his truck and settled her inside.

When he returned to the scene of the accident, he found a clearly angered Ted Lynch.

"What are you to her, Nolan?"

Confident that Laurie was now taken care of sufficiently, Blake rounded on Ted Lynch. A piercing blue look of pure hatred centered on Laurie's ex-husband.

"I'm her friend, Lynch. You inflicted so much harm on her it will take another man years to erase the damage. Haven't you done enough? Get out of my way."

Ted was infuriated that Laurie had responded to Blake Nolan so quickly and was still annoyed at the scene he had come upon at Laurie's apartment. He was not a man used to taking commands easily.

"Just a minute, Nolan," Ted said belligerently, "if all you are is her friend, I think I should deal with her."

"Lynch, let me put this in terms you can understand. If I ever see you around Laurie again, or even hear that you have contacted her in any way, I'll break every bone in your body. Do I make myself clear?" Blake gritted the words in clipped sentences.

"Why you arrogant son..." Ted began, but Blake interrupted him.

"Lynch, I have never used my size to press my advantage with anyone, but with you I could make an exception." Blake glared at him. "And enjoy it."

Blake didn't wait for a reply. He walked to the policeman in charge, a man he knew from his work with the police sponsored boy's camp. After finding out all the details of the accident, he told the man he was taking Laurie from the scene.

Once back at his apartment, Blake took Laurie to his bed, carefully loosened her clothing and pulled a comforter over her. He got her to take a couple aspirin and

then let her sleep.

As for himself, he spent a very introspective night while keeping his vigil. He wondered why he hadn't told her about his feelings for her, that he owned the apartment building, and his plans for the future. As the long night dragged on, he contemplated the future of his relationship with Laurie Matthews.

When Laurie awakened the next morning, she was quiet as Blake explained the accident to her—whose fault it was, what the police had done with her car. They sat at Blake's dining room table sharing coffee and a light breakfast for Laurie.

"What was Lynch doing there?" Blake asked as politely as he could. Just thinking about the insensitive fool made Blake's hackles rise.

"I guess he was in traffic just like you. His office is in the direction of mine."

"Oh," Blake was at a loss for words. He could tell that something more than the accident was bothering Laurie. Finally he heard what it was.

"I don't need for you to fight my battles for me, Blake."

"Like what, for instance?"

"Like telling me I should change jobs or telling Ted to stay away from me," she answered succinctly. "I told you once before that I'm an adult. I don't need your protection."

"I'm sorry. I was concerned for you both times. I didn't mean to overstep the boundaries of our friendship." Back to square one, Blake thought errantly.

His apology didn't sound sincere enough for Laurie, so she continued. "Just so that you'll understand, Blake, I will make whatever decision I need to about my life—what to work at, who to see. I've come a long way in the last year, all alone. And I'm going to continue just that way. Do you understand?" Her voice was strident. She was confused about her feelings for Blake Nolan and felt defen-

sive. She couldn't think of anything to do but rail at him.

"I said I was sorry. What else do you want me to do? I can't live your life for you, and I don't want to." Blake stood up and ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. Women! How could anyone figure them out?

Laurie went to her apartment and refused to see Blake for the rest of the weekend.

Laurie recovered from the shock of the accident but had more difficulty with her feelings toward Blake, which were growing beyond the bounds of their platonic agreement. For this reason, she decided to distance herself from him. It was easy because Blake had business out of town and was gone for four days.

During that time, Laurie confronted her own desires; emotions had surfaced which she had not experienced since her high school days. Blake had offered her friendship, which she had gladly taken. But he had not asked for anything else. She remembered his words to her ex-husband on the day of the accident.

"I'm her friend and it will take another man years to erase the damage you've done." This made perfect sense to her. Blake only wanted her as a friend; he had no intention of being that man. She was just another stray to him, like the Little Brothers he counseled, like the animals he found and took to his sister's. And that she couldn't countenance. The times she had been in his arms, touched his broad chest, and accepted his kindnesses had left her with a warm glow of love, unlike anything she had ever felt before.

All she could determine to do was speed up the process of finding another job, in another area. If she had survived marriage to Ted Lynch, a nervous breakdown, and the trauma of anorexia nervosa, she could recover from loving Blake Nolan.

She had been considering various administrative jobs in other states, and Blake knew it, but she had not found anything to suit her. Maybe now she wouldn't be so particular about the jobs and seriously consider some of the offers.

With new confidence now that she knew what she was going to do with her life, she decided to venture into a new dimension; she invited Blake to dinner on a Sunday night in early September as payment for all the meals he had provided for her and as an apology for being so rude to him after her accident.

Laurie thought she was ready to get back into cooking, a pastime she had enjoyed in the early years of her marriage, before the trouble had begun with Ted. Eating with Blake had been fun and she no longer found food repulsive, even though she could never think of herself as hungry. She had gained almost ten pounds since returning to Fort Wayne and meeting Blake. She owed him an appreciation dinner.

It started out very well. The shopping had been no problem but as the day progressed and she viewed the quantity of food, she began to panic. Knowing that she was being ridiculous and determined to overcome her weakness, she persevered. She had planned roast chicken, stuffing, mashed potatoes, gravy, green beans, hot homemade Parkerhouse rolls and banana split cake.

Anxious to see her again, Blake chose to come early just to keep her company while she cooked and to see if he could be of any help. It did not take him but a moment to see that she was distressed with what she was doing.

"Can I help?" he offered.

Taking a deep breath, she said, "No, I can manage." She had just started to mash the potatoes.

Blake watched her until he saw the first tear roll silently down her cheek. He could

see that she was completely strung out. Silently, he reached over, shut the mixer off, took her hand and led her into the other room with his arm draped easily around her. She nearly collapsed into his arms in tears.

"Blake... I'm so sorry... so..."

"Shh... shh... don't worry about it," he consoled. Seeing her like this wrenched his heart. He picked her up and carried her into her bedroom, laying her gently on the bed. His fingers pushed her hair off her face. "Just relax, pretty brown eyes, just relax. It's okay."

"But... I wanted... to do something for you... oh, Blake, I'm so sorry." And there was a new flood of tears. He took her into his arms and clutched her to him. The bones, angles and planes of her thin body disappeared into the soft comfort of his.

When she seemed calm at last, he lay her back on the pillows and covered her with a blanket. He wasn't sure if she was asleep or not, but he knew that he had to see about the food. As soon as he stood up, she moaned.

"Don't leave," she whispered.

"I'm not. I just have to turn off the oven. I'll be right back."

"Promise?"

Blake grinned. "Promise."

He made quick work of turning off the oven and removing the chicken. He checked the burner under the green beans and turned that off also, noticing at the same time that the rolls had risen and were overflowing the pan. Well, it all looked good at least. Maybe he would come back later and eat something, once Laurie was asleep. But she was his primary concern just now; his appetite would just have to wait.

When he returned to the bedroom, Laurie was into a fresh spate of tears. Without a thought, he drew her into his arms and comforted her.

"Don't cry, love, don't cry," he whispered, petting her hair with one hand and rubbing her back rhythmically with the other.

"Hold me, please..."

"I've got you, Laurie, I'm not leaving."

She leaned backwards, pulling him with her down to the bed. Giving up the pretense, Blake turned around on the mattress and leaned against the pillows, pulling her fully into his arms. Soon they were both lying full length under the blanket and her crying was subsiding. He kissed her forehead tenderly, smoothing her hair away, murmuring soothing words.

When she lifted her face to his, he could not resist kissing her mouth. Her arms tightened around him. Blake kissed the tears from her eyes and with the tiniest laps of his tongue, he removed the salty drops from her cheeks.

The heady combination of emotions started a chain reaction of passionate desire that, once awakened, demanded satisfaction at all costs.

"Blake, make love to me," she finally begged.

With his head buried in her hair and trying desperately to keep some semblance of logic, he questioned, "Are you sure, Laurie?"

She replied with silence, arching her thin body into his. Despite his best intentions, he found himself doing her bidding. Cognizant of his size, and hers, Blake made the most exquisite love to Laurie.

Ever so slowly, Blake removed her slacks and blouse, blazing warm kisses across her flushed skin. The tiny undergarments dispensed with, he cuddled her naked body against his. But Laurie was not content to be a passive party to this love scene; she craved his love and closeness. After he removed his own clothing, she seductively rubbed her

breasts against his hairy chest, stimulating both of them. She kissed him passionately, eager for his response.

When Blake sensed that she was ready for the two of them to become one, he eased her gently on top of him, knowing he would crush her otherwise, and wanting her to set the pace of their lovemaking. He kissed his name from her lips as together they soared to heights of physical fantasy, then fell asleep in a sated embrace.

Blake awoke long before dawn and smiled contentedly at the tiny figure draped across his chest. He tightened his arms around her momentarily, kissed the top of her head and savored the remembrance of their lovemaking. Reluctantly he extricated her from his arms and, covering her securely, left the bed and tiptoed from the room carrying his shoes and clothes.

He was on a tight time schedule to catch a plane to the west coast for a two week sales meeting, but he took the time to clean her kitchen and remove all evidence of the amount of food that had so upset her. Before leaving her apartment, he wrote her a note.

Dear Laurie,

Leaving you this morning was the hardest thing I've ever done. I'll call tonight and I'll count the minutes until I see you a week from Friday.

Love,
Blake

Laurie awakened slowly, her mind a jumble of thoughts. First there was happiness of what she and Blake had shared, then chagrin that she had asked him to make love to her, and finally guilt that she had put them both in such an untenable position. A certain sadness lingered as she re-evaluated her life and made constructive plans.

Blake spent a frustrating two weeks in

California. He was totally uninterested in the activities of the sales meeting, and was unable to contact Laurie either. When she didn't answer her phone two consecutive nights, he tried calling her at work, only to be informed she either wasn't in or she couldn't take any calls. In desperation, he called Charlie, the doorman, to confirm that Laurie had been seen coming and going at the apartment. She had.

He cursed the airlines when his flights were delayed and he didn't get back into Fort Wayne until two in the morning on Saturday. No lights were on in Laurie's apartment so Blake decided to try and wait until morning to seek her out.

But he was unable to sleep. He was up at five, drinking coffee, and prowling his apartment barefoot, his hair tousled. He began sorting through his accumulated mail, tossing all the junk mail into a wastebasket, separating the bills into a pile and opening only those envelopes he couldn't determine the contents from the outside. A broad grin split his face when he came upon the contract for the sale of the apartment building. This document was going to make all the difference in the world in what he had to say to Laurie.

He went to the kitchen, poured another cup of coffee, then leisurely walked to the window to watch the sunrise. Absently, he carried the rest of his mail with him. Losing interest in the view, he looked back at the pile of correspondence. A pink envelope caught his attention and he ripped it open. Immediately his eyes dropped to the signature. It was from Laurie. He went back to the beginning.

Dear Blake,

By the time you read this I will probably be gone. I have decided to take a job in Massachusetts as vice president of a nursing home chain.

Words can't express how much your friendship has meant to me since I moved into the apartment complex. You have

helped me through a very difficult time and I appreciate it so very much.

I've allowed myself a week to find an apartment at the new location and I'll write when I get settled.

Thanks again for everything.

Sincerely,

Laurie

Leaving! She was leaving forever. Him, her apartment, her job. Dear God, have I done that to her? Blake read the note again and lifted his eyes to the window.

Movement in the parking lot caught his attention. Narrowing his eyes, he identified Laurie setting a train case into the trunk of her car.

Still grasping the pink note, he bolted from his apartment, barefoot, and took the stairwell two and three steps at a time. He rounded each corner with large strides, not feeling the chilled concrete and metal under his feet. Breathing hard from the descent of six flights, he slammed his hand on the safety bar of the fire door and exploded into the early morning sun rising from the side of the building.

His eyes searched the lot for her car, which was just beginning to move. In a flash of insight, Blake ran to the exit, cutting across the manicured lawn and jumping over the trimmed low boxwood hedge, arriving only seconds before Laurie's car.

Distraught and sad, Laurie's mind was not on the mechanics of driving so when she saw Blake in front of her blocking the entrance, legs firmly planted and arms akimbo, she slammed on the brakes and stopped only inches from his body.

Blake didn't flinch—determination steeled his nerves. Intense blue eyes glared at her through the windshield. Waving the pink note clutched in his fist high in the air, he shouted at her.

"What do you mean leaving me a cold, impersonal note like this?"

Laurie had no chance to answer before

he continued.

"Even friends don't do this to each other! And I'm not feeling very friendly toward you right now. How could you *do* this?" He was shaking the note at her.

In all the time she had known him, Laurie had never seen Blake lose his temper, except at Ted Lynch and that was deserved. But there was no question that he was furious now. She was so completely mesmerized by his actions that she didn't move—couldn't move—she could only stare at him with rounded wide eyes.

An early morning commuter crowd had started to gather to watch the intriguing scene of the barefoot man with no shirt confronting the woman sitting in the car. A couple of early morning joggers stopped; Charlie stepped out of the entrance; a car pulled up behind Laurie's and the driver got out, gawking at the performance. Blake was oblivious to all spectators; his cold blue eyes were riveted on Laurie.

"Didn't you owe me the courtesy of telling me you were leaving in person?" he shouted again.

Getting no reaction from her, Blake ran frustrated fingers through his already mussed hair and looked around. More joggers had stopped, cars on the boulevard were slowing, curtains at the apartment windows were pulled aside and curious faces peered out.

A slow smile spread across his face as he realized what he must look like—half naked, barefoot and yelling at Laurie. He put his palms on the hood of her car and centered his eyes back on Laurie, still immobile behind the wheel.

"Look at me, Laurie. Six months ago I was a perfectly sane man. Today, I'm standing here making a perfect ass of myself over you, and I don't even care. Can you hear me?" Laurie nodded.

"Then listen to this. I've sold this apartment complex and bought a large

tract of land. I'm going to build houses for a living. I can't offer you anything like Ted Lynch did—no vacations at Club Med, no Mercedes, no fancy clothes—and I don't want to. But what I *can* offer is a full partnership in Nolan Homes, a beat up panel truck, a big, old colonial farmhouse in the country. . . ." His eyes softened as they looked into hers, "And maybe a couple of dark haired kids with beautiful brown eyes. I love you, Laurie. Will you marry me?"

A gamut of thoughts and emotions traversed Laurie's face as she sat in suspended animation looking at Blake Nolan. This was her moment of truth. Was she ready to accept what he was offering? If she were truthful with herself, it was what she wanted.

Before she had a chance to do too much analysis, he continued. "It won't be easy, Laurie. There are going to be a few lean years, but we can do this together, if you're willing." His eyes never left hers. Time seemed interminable as he waited for a reaction from her.

After an eternity, Laurie put the car in park and pushed open the door. The wide mouth that Blake Nolan so loved split into a genuine grin. "I accept."

In seconds she was wrapped in his arms and he was kissing her like there was no tomorrow. When he swooped her into his arms and, laughing and kissing, they headed toward the apartment entrance, the assembled crowd burst into spontaneous applause.

Much later in the snuggled confines of Blake's bed, they discussed their relationship.

"I don't want to be one of your strays, Blake," she confided.

"You're not."

"But you always seem to want to protect me."

"That's true."

"Blake!"

"Laurie, my love, let me explain some very basic home truths to you. I want to protect you. *I can* protect you. Despite women's liberation, some of us in this world are stronger, physically and emotionally, than others. I love you so much that I don't want anything to harm you—not Ted Lynch, not your job—hell, Laurie, I don't even want you to be too hot or too cold! I'll always be protective and there isn't anything either one of us can do to change that."

"But there are so many things I don't know about you, Blake. Why didn't you tell me you owned this building? Or that you planned to build houses? You know everything about me, and I know very little about you."

Blake pulled her into the circle of his arms. "You know all the important things, love. You know that I like children and animals, that you will always be safe with me and that I love you very much." He was teasing her and she knew it.

"Were you serious about me helping you with Nolan Homes?"

"Certainly. You handle all the administrative work and decorate the model homes, and I'll build them. Is that enough of a fifty-fifty proposition for you?"

She leaned up on one elbow and looked at him. "What it means, Blake Nolan, is that you get your way. I'd have to quit my job."

"You already did."

"Only to take another one."

Blake's eyes grew serious. "I won't get all my way, Laurie. I really want to break Ted Lynch's bones for what he did to

you. He is careless with his possessions."

"Do you think of me as a possession?"

Blake gave her his most charming, disarming grin. "You are mine, aren't you?"

Laurie thought that over. While it was true that she wanted to be independent and considered for her own worth, there was a subliminal deliciousness to knowing that Blake loved her enough to want to protect and shield her. The idea of someone to look over her forever was appealing.

Laurie leaned over onto his chest with a glowing smile. "Yes, I guess I am."

His arms came around her in one of his big bear hugs. "Good, because I always take care of what's mine. But there's another side to that, sweetheart."

Laurie was busy kissing his neck but she murmured, "What?"

"I'm yours, and you have to take care of me, too."

Laurie laughed as her arms circled his neck. "*That* I can handle!"

A long time later, her dancing brown eyes looked directly into his happy blue ones.

"Guess what?"

Blake kissed her soundly and tightened his arms around her. "What—other than I love you to distraction?"

An impish grin crossed her face. "I'm hungry!"

Blake's eyes mellowed and his face softened with love for her.

"I'm hungry too," he said seductively and then grinned outrageously at her, "but I guess I'll get up and fix us something to eat anyway." ♥



***"I'm in the business of
telling jokes, but
sometimes jokes are
not enough..."***



SPECIALLY for families in crises, the unemployed, the alcoholic, the homeless, the elderly and others facing difficult times. Millions of these people will receive a helping hand from The Salvation Army this Christmas season.

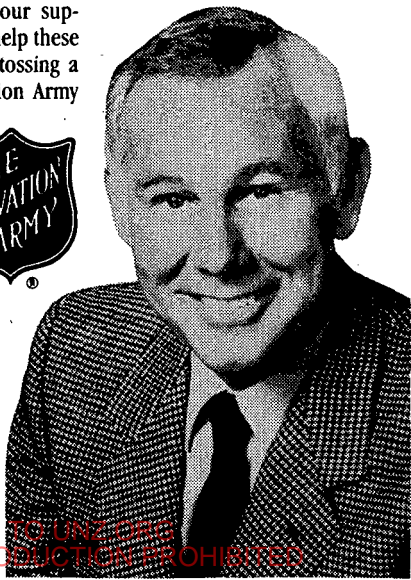
Shut-ins in nursing homes and hospitals will be visited by its League of Mercy. Those who have no family celebration to attend will have holiday meals at Salvation Army centers. Families in need will receive baskets of food, clothing and toys for the children. Prison inmates will be able to send gifts to their children with the help of the Army's special Toy Lift Programs.

And throughout the year, The Salvation Army will meet the day-to-day needs of many with its corps community centers, day care centers, senior citizens residences, feeding programs, shelters, rehabilitation centers and other facilities which number more than 11,000 nationwide.

This wonderful ministry needs your support in order to flourish. Won't you help these Christian soldiers in their work by tossing a generous contribution into a Salvation Army kettle or sending a check to your local Salvation Army? Your gift to The Salvation Army will keep the Christmas spirit of sharing alive throughout the new year."



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Amber-Eyed Man

Meredith Moore, raised in foster homes and craving love, seeks temporary refuge at the Mexican estate of Ward Sanderson. But what she finds is a world of wealth, love and familial warmth that transforms her life into a fairy tale.

— JOHANNA PHILLIPS —

A soft breeze caressed Meredith Moore as she gazed from the bedroom window out into the velvet dark of the Mexican night. The cobbled courtyard below was bordered with blossoming gardenias and faraway she could just make out a graceful mountain silhouetted against the darkening sky. As tired as she was from her journey, she could have looked out onto that scene forever, so different was it from everything she'd ever

known. With an effort, she turned to finish unpacking the last of her suitcases.

Her plush bedroom matched the surroundings in beauty, and she soon found its splendor was more than equaled by that of the attached bath. Eager to soak away the grime and fatigue of the long day, Meredith filled the tub and settled gratefully in the warm water. Her immediate cares slipped away, and for the moment she could concentrate on relax-

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ing—and could forget what had brought her to the secluded Mexican villa of Ward Sanderson, a man she did not even know.

Meredith had yet to meet her new employer, who had been in a meeting when she arrived. But she had spent a few delightful minutes with his precocious adopted daughter, Maggie.

After her bath, Meredith went back to her room. Lifting her hair with both hands, she piled it on top of her head and studied her reflection in the mirror. She didn't look one day older than twenty-five, though recently she'd felt at least one hundred. Sighing, she let the golden locks fall and turned to the bed to pick up her skirt and blouse.

Suddenly she leaped backward with a gasp as something brushed her bare toes. She looked down and instead of the curling back of a venomous scorpion, she saw a yellow-ribboned braid of dark hair under the rose bedspread. She knew it could belong to none other than Maggie Sanderson, and she determined to wreak playful revenge on her host's four-year-old daughter.

Quickly, quietly, she walked to the other side of the bed, then in a flash dived under it, reaching for the small wiggling figure. Grabbing the small sturdy body, she tickled her ribs and the child laughed, turning from side to side in an attempt to get away.

"So this is the monster that attacked my toe." Meredith nipped a small arm with her teeth. "I'll teach you, monster, to go around attacking people."

"No... No! I'm Princess Leia!" the child shouted between giggles.

"Oh, yeah? Well, I'm King Kong!"

The playful scene was soon shattered, however, when a voice boomed out, "What in the name of common sense is going on here?"

Meredith heard the deep voice before she saw the two shiny, black shoes planted

firmly beside the bed. The child grew still at once, then a delighted, impish smile lit up her pixie face.

"Daddy!" In a flash Maggie was out from under the bed. Embarrassed, Meredith climbed out and stood up with as much dignity as the circumstances allowed and turned her head up to look into the richest pools of amber she'd ever seen. She barely managed to stifle a gasp of surprise, but was unable to tear her eyes away from those brooding tawny depths.

Yet while his eyes were soft, his voice was harsh as it broke the silence. "Who the devil are you?"

Meredith was frozen with shock. Her mouth opened and trembled. "Meredith Moore."

"Oh for God's sake! Jim didn't say... I assumed you would be... well, to be frank, closer to retirement age!"

She licked her dry lips. "I have a ways to go, I'm afraid."

"I can see that! You're not at all what I expected," he said cruelly.

She took a quivering breath, despising the tears that sprang to her eyes.

"I'm terribly sorry. I'll leave at once." Bold words. She didn't know where she would go, but pride forced her to say them.

He didn't respond immediately, but allowed his gaze to flicker over her, the tawny eyes narrowed to mere slits. Then he gave a brusque gesture.

"We won't discuss it now. Be in the library in fifteen minutes. Have you had dinner?" His voice was impersonal, crisp, and cool.

"No, I haven't," she said with a tremor in her voice.

Never removing his eyes from her, he nodded his head slightly and said, "Fifteen minutes."

"Certainly," she responded coldly.

He walked out, with Maggie following closely behind.

As soon as he was gone, she flung herself onto the comforting softness of the bed.

She cursed her fate. Coming here had seemed like such a good idea! Jim Sanderson, Ward's cousin, and director of the clinic where she worked as an X-Ray technician, had arranged for her to take a leave of absence from her job and come to Mexico to help Ward with his adopted daughter, Maggie. Meredith had jumped at the chance; she'd felt desperate to get away. Her four-year-old romance with intern Paul Crowley had just come to a disastrous ending, when he'd left her for another woman. It was not until it was over that Meredith realized how much he had used her—both financially and emotionally. As an orphan who had been brought up in foster homes for most of her life, Meredith realized that her folly in trusting Paul came from her deep-seated need to be loved and accepted. Without family, she felt so isolated after the breakup that Mexico sounded like the perfect solution. Perhaps she could help the little girl Maggie find her way in life.

Meredith finally rose and went to the mirror and bathed the tears from her eyes. As she looked at herself, she felt a new resolve. She would not let another man devastate her, as Paul had. If this Ward Sanderson thought he could bully her, he had another thing coming. After all, he was only a man.

Meredith emerged from her room and directed by Sophia, the Mexican maid, she made her way tremulously to the library. When she got there, the door was slightly ajar, and her host was talking on the telephone.

"No, I'm not angry, Jim," she overheard him saying, "but dammit, you should have told me a little more about her. I assumed she was older. How the hell was I to know she looked like a college

kid? She grew up in foster homes? Oh, wonderful, that's just what I need! A sweet young opportunist without a family who'll insinuate herself in my life!"

The awkwardness of the situation made Meredith clench her teeth. The man stopped speaking, and she heard the click of the receiver being replaced. She waited a moment longer, then knocked on the door. When his command to enter came, it was with reluctance that she pushed open the door and entered the book-lined room.

He was standing in the shadows at the far end, his dark head outlined against the light draperies. He didn't bother to move as she closed the door.

"Sit down, Miss Moore." It was an uncompromising order.

She sought a small, straight-backed chair. She seated herself, then faced him.

He walked to the large, leather-covered desk in the middle of the room, and seated himself on the corner, all the while keeping his gaze fixed on her. Although his glance was cool, almost clinical, Meredith's body responded to his scrutiny with an almost sensual shudder. She was furious. The conceited prig! Who in the world did he think he was to subject her to such treatment?

When he spoke his voice was softer than she expected. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-five." She was so angry she could hardly speak.

"Twenty-five," he repeated, meditatively. "You look about . . . eighteen."

Meredith's lips tightened. "My problem, not yours."

A smile almost reached the tawny eyes. "You're not what I expected. Jim said you were a technician working in Rochester, Minnesota at the Mayo Clinic. He neglected to mention that you were young and attractive so I assumed you were older. After all, that's quite a responsible job, and the Mayo Clinic—"

Meredith did not let him continue. "Well, I'm a responsible person," she said calmly, though she was furious inside. "I'm sorry Jim misled you. Naturally I won't impose on your hospitality." She couldn't keep the words from coming, but bit back and swallowed her desire to tell him what she thought of him.

Silently he continued to look at her. Suddenly, he stood and came toward her, but just walked past her to the door. With his hand on the knob he said, "Let's have dinner."

Meredith wasn't sure she had heard right. She got unsteadily to her feet and smoothed her skirt with shaky hands.

"Come on." He led her out of the library to a small cozy room where a table was set for two. He held out a chair for her, placed a large bowl of soup in front of her, then served himself and sat down across from her.

Meredith glanced at him quickly. Damn him! Why was he acting now as if she were a guest? But her tension eased and she had finished half the soup when he spoke again.

"While we're eating I'll tell you about Maggie. In a few more weeks I'm taking her home where she'll start public school. I don't suppose you know that I actually live in Tulsa, although of course I do spend a lot of time here looking after the family plant in Guadalajara. At any rate, because Maggie was born in the fall, she'd normally have to wait another year to go to school, but I was told she'd be taken if she could master a few basics. She needs help to accomplish that. Jim thought you could help."

"And now that you have seen that I'm not middle-aged and fat, you don't think I'll be able to handle it." It was a petulant thing for her to say and she knew it. The twinkle in his eyes told her he knew it too, but he ignored her comment.

"Maggie has had a procession of peo-

ple looking after her. Despite all that, she's a well-adjusted little girl. What she really needs is children to play with. It's important for her to get into school now."

Meredith continued to eat. He seemed to be determined to make conversation. "Jim said you took your training at Tulsa Memorial, but were in Rochester for the last few years. Did you like the work?"

She ignored his question, preferring to pose one of her own. "Now that you've seen the opportunist who was raised in foster homes at government expense, what do you think?"

A glimmer of admiration crossed his face, and his lips twitched slightly. He raised his brows. "You don't miss much, do you?"

"I can't afford to. I'm all I've got."

They finished the meal in silence, and when Ward rang a bell, Sophia came and piled the dishes onto a serving cart and roled it to the door.

Ward poured them both coffee and said, "Tell me about yourself."

"You know all there is to know, Mr. Sanderson," she replied. "Jim thought I could help you with Maggie, but I see now that he was wrong. So if I could trouble you for transportation into Guadalajara tomorrow, I'll check into a hotel."

"Are you always so confident?" he asked.

"No, not always," she answered honestly.

His eyes twinkled. "I want to know more about you. Your plans. Your ambitions," he said.

She was silent for as long as it took her to fight down the angry words that leaped to her lips. When she spoke, her voice was wooden with control. "Mr. Sanderson," I fail to see how you can possibly be interested in my personal ambitions. That you find me unsuitable to be in your home is your privilege, but to pry into my per-

sonal life is not."

His eyes locked onto hers. He looked deep, as if he were looking into her past, her present, and her future. His face was expressionless and his words when they came shocked her.

"I think I've changed my mind about that. Does anyone call you Merry?" His voice was almost lazy as if he were talking to himself.

Surprised by the question, Meredith shook her head.

"Then I shall," he said softly. He sat up and flexed his shoulder muscles wearily. "It's been a long day. Go to bed, Meredith Moore. In the morning I'll dig out the list of requirements for Maggie."

Meredith's lips parted in dismay. "You want me to stay?"

He got to his feet and stood looking down at her. "Yes, Merry. I want you to stay." A smile creased his cheeks. He reached down a hand and pulled her to her feet. As he looked at her his incredible eyes softened and suddenly they seemed to envelop her in a warm snare of tender amusement. "Don't try to figure me out, Merry *mia*," he said gently.

He turned her toward the door and in her confused state she was scarcely aware she was being conducted to the foot of the steps leading to the upper balcony. On the first step she turned, her face level with his, a curiously guarded look on her face.

He was standing very quietly, his eyes probing hers with a startling intensity. She hesitated, then started up the steps. Once she reached the top she looked back, but the hall was empty, and the last few minutes she'd spent with him seemed like a dream.

The next morning Meredith was up, dressed, and standing beside the window when the sun made its first appearance. She had spent a restless night. Ward Sanderson had floated in and out of her

dreams all night long. She wasn't sure why, but even now it made her faintly uncomfortable to think about him.

On impulse she threw on a lavender sundress and left her room. She walked slowly down the stairs and upon reaching the courtyard, was pleased to find that the sunlight was already warm. She crossed the courtyard, and moved toward the back of the house. She rounded a corner and could see the glimmer of water in a swimming pool. She heard splashing and Maggie's excited voice.

"Good morning, Merry."

Somehow Meredith wasn't startled by her host's voice. Ward stood in the shade of a flowering shrub. Wearing bathing trunks, he was rubbing his head with a large bath towel.

Meredith looked up into tawny eyes and decided that she liked them—this morning, anyway. Last night they had been more ferocious. "Good morning," she replied.

"Do you want to take a swim?" he asked softly.

"No." Her answer was too abrupt so she softened it. "No, thank you. I don't swim."

"I'll tell Carmen you'll breakfast with Maggie and me."

She watched him move away and then, not knowing what to do with herself, she went back to her room and applied a touch of lipstick, then ran a comb through her hair.

When she went downstairs, it was with Maggie's hand tucked firmly in her own. The little girl was a delight. She had come into Meredith's room, wet braids hanging over her shoulders and an impish grin on her face. Meredith had brushed and re-braided Maggie's hair while she kept up an endless chatter. She was going to be fun to be with.

Breakfast on a shaded terrace was easier than Meredith had thought it would

be. Maggie acted as a buffer between her and Ward. She watched him with his daughter. He didn't even remotely resemble the stern-faced man of last night; although more relaxed now, he was far from careless in his attitude toward the little girl. When she spoke he listened closely to what she was saying. And Maggie, Meredith was surprised to discover, took on a more mature personality when she was with him.

"We're going to enroll you in school when we get home, so you'll be very busy," Ward told her halfway through the meal. "Merry is going to teach you some things that will help when you start school."

Maggie looked at Meredith with eyes big and round with astonishment. "Are you Mary Mary quite contrary?"

Ward laughed. The amber eyes gleamed at Meredith. There was nothing too familiar in his eyes, so she smiled happily back at him.

"My name is Meredith, Maggie, but call me Merry if you want to."

"I want to," Maggie said simply. Then she turned to her father. "Daddy, can we show Merry the orchids? Daddy grows the most beautiful orchids. Please, daddy, can I show her my *Margarieta*?"

"If Merry would like to..."

"Orchids? Oh I would love to see them," Meredith exclaimed, astounded that a business man as stern as Ward would grow orchids as a hobby.

"Finish your meal first, Maggie," Ward said sternly though his eyes were smiling.

Fifteen minutes later, Maggie led them away from the porch. They went through a doorway and down a corridor into a shaded, glass-enclosed room. Along one side of the small room was a long bench with three slatted steps lined with pots of orchids. She was speechless. She had never seen anything so lovely.

"They're beautiful! Absolutely beautiful!" she exclaimed breathlessly.

Maggie pointed to one particular plant. "I helped Daddy divide it and next year I'll have a flower. I named it the *Margarieta*."

"Lovely! You'll have your very own corsage. I had one when I graduated from high school. My oldest and dearest friend sent it to me and I kept it in the refrigerator for days and days."

She turned towards Ward and caught him looking at her strangely. He reached down and plucked a large ivory bloom from one of the pots and handed it to her. Meredith's lips parted in speechless astonishment.

"Oh! Oh—you shouldn't have! It's beautiful. Perfectly lovely." She smiled at him. "Thank you. But," she protested, "I don't have a refrigerator to put it in."

He smiled back at her from the depth of his amber eyes and she felt a shiver go through her body. Her self-consciousness, which had temporarily left, returned.

They left the dampness of the orchid room and walked back out into the sunlight of the courtyard. Ward reached into his pocket and pulled out a paper. "Here's a list of requirements from the school," he said. "I'll be gone until evening on business. You and Maggie can get started on her ABC's. I'll tell Carmen to have the dinner served for the two of us in the formal dining room so you can wear your orchid."

He gazed at her steadily for a long moment, then he was gone, leaving her feeling curiously unsettled. What was it about this man that made her so perturbed, she wondered. She tried to get a hold of herself, and together with Maggie they went upstairs to the little girl's room to begin working on the school's requirements.

That afternoon Meredith wrote a long letter to Maude Fiske, the social worker

who had taken Meredith to the orphanage after her mother had been killed by a hit-and-run driver. All these years, as Meredith was shuttled from foster home to foster home, Maude had provided a sense of permanence and stability. Meredith knew she would want to know about the unusual events that had brought her to this magnificent *hacienda* in Guadalajara, of all places. Before she sealed the letter, she asked Carmen, the head housekeeper, for the address of the *hacienda* so Maude could write her.

"To your *familia*?" the housekeeper asked, indicating the letter.

"No. To a dear friend."

She asked Carmen if she had a family. The question opened the way for a full hour's visit.

"*Senor Ward* is a wonderful man. Don't you think?" Carmen asked finally.

"Oh, yes. He's very nice." How could she say, that he scared her to death?

"Ward give you a bad time, eh?" Carmen, her eyes warm with sympathy, spoke with the familiarity of a friend rather than an employee.

"No. He has a right to know about the people he takes into his home."

"Ward is not a hard man. He may appear to be so. He is a much important man. I've known him since he was a small boy."

Carmen told her how Ward had been raised by his grandparents after his mother died when he was still a child. His grandfather, though an American, had married a beautiful Spanish *senorita*, Dona Margarieta, and had adopted Mexico as his country. Ward had eventually taken over the running of the numerous family holdings after his father died. But he had never become totally Mexican himself. After his grandfather died, Ward had divided his time between the Rancho de Margarieta, Tulsa, and the plant in Guadalajara.

"Ward is much loved by the people here," Carmen said with twinkling eyes. "Much of the *senoritas, americanas*, too. They all think they catch the rich husband." She laughed. "*Dona Margarieta* has a different idea. She wants him to marry with a Mexican girl and get a great-grandson before she dies. Francisca Calderon is her favorite choice."

Later Meredith reflected on what Carmen had told her about Ward as she prepared for dinner. So his mother had died when he was old enough to miss her. She did understand him a little better, now, but pity him, she did not. She would be a fool to feel a moment's pity for such a self-assured person.

Meredith was quite nervous about having dinner alone with Ward and had piled her hair on top of her head in an effort to look more mature. A soft knock finally came on the door. She pulled it open and there he was. Ward smiled at the surprise on her face.

"Why so surprised? I live here, too. Remember?" The words died out as, all of a sudden, he was looking at her strangely. She wanted to go into the closet and hide.

"What's the matter?" she asked, forcing her tone to be light. "Have I got egg on my face?"

"It's your hair. You're not the suave, urbane type. It makes you look jaded." Was he teasing? He couldn't be flirting with her!

She tried to laugh. It wasn't much of a success. "Perhaps I am jaded."

He laughed and she decided again she liked his eyes. "No. You're refreshing, soft as a marshmallow, and..." He tilted his head and studied her. "And... whimsical."

"Whimsical?" Did he think she was a feather-brain?

"I should have added stubborn, argumentative, and late for dinner. Brush out

your hair so we can go." He moved into the room.

She looked horrified. "Do you do this often?"

"Ask women to take their hair down? Of course not. Sometimes I do it for them." He was grinning broadly. Could this be the same man who almost threw her out of the house last night? "Well...?"

"Okay. But if I look like a mess it'll be your fault."

"You couldn't look like a mess if you tried."

"You're totally... unpredictable."

"And you're wasting time."

She removed the pins and her hair cascaded to her shoulders in a golden wave.

"I was right." The satisfied look on his face made her sorry she had given in so easily.

"Are you always right, Mr. Sander-son?"

"Not always, Miss Moore. I didn't think marshmallows could bite." There was mischief in the tawny eyes. Without thinking, she allowed him to take her hand. "Hungry?"

"Starving," she admitted. And suddenly she was no longer nervous about having dinner with him.

Ward didn't release her hand until they walked into the dining room. It was a long luxurious room illuminated by a crystal chandelier. Ward seated Meredith and was about to seat himself when he looked down at her and smiled.

"Now what?" Meredith asked grinning.

"It's the orchid," he said. She had pinned the beautiful flower on her dress. "It isn't right there. It should be snuggled down in that gorgeous hair." He studied her seriously for a few seconds. "In that curve just under your left ear."

"Now you tell me. I don't have a bob-

by pin."

"I'll fix it. I've got a paper clip in my pocket."

She felt foolish as he fumbled with her hair and stirred restlessly.

"Be still or it'll fall in the soup."

She knew she should be feeling ill at ease and self-conscious. Instead she felt herself glowing with anticipation at the thought of having dinner with this attractive man, in these elegant surroundings, and being the object of such attention.

Ward finished securing the orchid in her hair, sat down opposite her and asked Carmen to bring in the food. All through dinner, the conversation flowed easily as she chatted with Ward as if she had known him all her life.

When the meal was over Ward tucked her hand in the crook of his arm and they went to the library, where a fire blazed gently.

As the evening progressed, Ward played a record of Spanish guitar music. One song was so stirring that tears misted her eyes and she turned to see Ward looking at her. His hand came out and covered hers where it lay on the seat between them. She wasn't the least embarrassed for him to see she was moved by the music. She turned her eyes away feeling peaceful, content to let her hand remain beneath his.



The marvelous days continued, and she felt all the while as though she were suspended in time. The hours she spent with Ward and Maggie were both wonderful and strange for a woman who had never known family warmth before. The little girl was a delight to be with and Ward treated her as if she were an old and dear friend. She never allowed herself to think of Ward's life outside the *hacienda*. She didn't want to think of him as a wealthy man directing large corporations.

One day, Meredith and Maggie were picnicking in the yard and were having a particularly riotous time, giggling and tickling each other.

"This has got to be the noisiest place in Mexico." Ward came in, amusement spread all over his face.

"Daddy!" Maggie ran to him and he lifted her up and kissed her before he set her on her feet.

"Hi, punkin. Am I invited to the picnic?"

"There's none left. We ate it all."

"Never mind. I don't have time anyway. I'm going to see old *abueta*."

"Can I go see great-grandmother? Can me and Merry come with you?" Maggie's voice was coaxing and she wrapped her arms around his legs.

Meredith flushed because his eyes were on her.

"Not this time. Next time I'll take both of you. Off you go, now, so I can talk with Merry for a minute." He watched her leave. "I'll be gone until tomorrow, Merry. Keep Maggie busy, OK?"

Carmen's words about the Spanish *senorita* his grandmother wanted him to marry flashed through Meredith's head. Not knowing where she got the courage to do so, she teased him: "I'd love to meet your grandmother someday. She sounds like a very determined lady. Carmen says she's got your future all mapped out for you, including your future wife."

She was astonished at the audacity of her words and expected him to lash back at her. Instead, he looked at her without anger. "That will never happen." He made the statement firmly and emphatically as he turned to leave.



"Merry, wake up!" Meredith heard the voice vaguely through the veil of sleep. It had to be Maggie. Who else would run into her bedroom calling her by name? She wished her head would stop hurting

so she could open her eyes. "Wake up, Merry!" As the voice called out again, the bed heaved and her stomach with it.

"Please, darling. Don't jump on the bed! Oh... my head! Move, honey. Hurry... I'm going..." She threw back the covers and got to her feet. Tiny claws were tearing deep inside her stomach and she felt bathed in cold perspiration. She made it to the bathroom and, leaning over the commode, gave way to her nausea.

"Are you sick, Merry?" Maggie crowded in beside her.

"Yes, darling. Go play like a good girl. Okay?"

The sickening, spinning feeling was lessened somewhat after she emptied the contents of her stomach. She sat down and peeled the band-aid from the place just above her ankle that was throbbing as if it had a life of its own.

Last night on the veranda she had felt a sharp sting, but had thought it was simply a giant mosquito. She looked at the wound now with disbelief. It was red and swollen. Something was obviously wrong. She felt so strange—almost outside herself. Her brain was clouded and her fevered head hot and dry. She couldn't remember a time when she felt so wretched.

There was a knock on the door and a deep voice called to her. The words coming through the door were jumbled in a strange disorder.

"Ward?" The word came out a mere whisper. She fastened her eyes on his face in mute appeal. "I'm... so sick."

He was there. Right there beside her, taking her hand in his. His voice was gentle, but urgent.

"What is it, Merry?"

"Don't touch me. I hurt so. I've got an infected mosquito bite on my leg, but there's got to be something more wrong with me than that." Big tears rolled out of the fevered eyes. "I'm sorry to be such a bother, but I need a doctor."

He looked at her leg. Seeing the angry red lines running up toward her knee, he swore softly.

"You have an infection all right, Merry. But don't worry—we'll get a doctor out to fix you up in no time." His face was near, yet curiously blurred. She closed her eyes with relief. Ward would take care of things. "Don't worry," he was saying. "Leave everything to me."

"I'm sorry," she whispered. Speech was an effort.

"Just rest, Merry." Her hand was held tightly. She wasn't alone! Please, don't go away, she begged silently. Don't leave me alone.

Vaguely she knew there were people in the room. She opened her eyes and tried to focus on the person bending over her, but the effort was too great and she closed them again. With listless disinterest she felt the pricks of the doctor's needle and heard the buzz of voice. Then she slept deeply and dreamlessly, holding fast to the strong fingers interlaced with hers.

When she woke up Sophia was sitting in a chair beside the bed.

"*Buenos dias, senorita.*" Her broad face expressed her concern.

"Is it morning?"

"*Si. Dos dias, senorita.*" She held up two fingers.

"Two mornings have gone by? It can't be!"

"I tell *Senor Ward* you awake."

"No. Don't bother him."

"He say tell him when you wake, *senorita.*"

"All right. Tell him if you like." She was weary and wanted to go back to sleep. She closed her eyes, heard Sophia leave the room and close the door behind her.

Through waves of fatigue she came swimming back to a certain awareness. Her eyelids felt as if two weights were attached to each of them, but with effort she opened them and saw Ward.

He sat down in a chair beside the bed. "You were bitten by a poisonous insect, probably a spider or a scorpion. You've been very sick, Merry. When you're better I'll tell you just how sick. Now go back to sleep and don't worry about a thing."

She couldn't have said anything if she had wanted to. Instead, with uncharacteristic impulsiveness, she grabbed his hand and held it to her cheek for a short moment. Thank you. She didn't know if she said the words aloud or not, but she meant them with all her heart.

When next she opened her eyes, the first thing she saw was a cluster of yellow roses. They stood in a vase on the table beside her bed. Everything was peaceful now and her body felt curiously light.

It must have been almost evening, when Maggie came to see her.

"Merry, Merry, I've something to tell you! Guess what? Guess what?" she said excitedly.

She smiled and hugged the child leaning over her.

"What's this big news that's making you so excited?"

"Daddy said someday I was going to have a mommy! One all my own!"

The smile stayed on Meredith's face but the sparkle faded from her eyes. "Hey—that's great! That is big news."

For the tiniest moment she felt terribly disappointed. It was insane. She was glad for Maggie. It was only...well...she hadn't thought Ward was even thinking of getting married. What was it that he had said the other evening? He had said something like, "*that will never happen.*" He must have changed his mind. He was probably marrying the Francisca who Carmen had mentioned.

A desperate feeling of loneliness possessed her, a loneliness that was her future. Turning on her side, she looked at the yellow roses. Her eyes roamed the room, taking in the beautiful furniture,

the rich draperies and carpet, the outward manifestations of wealth. An abundance of love was the only wealth she craved, and if love were riches, she was most certainly a pauper.

The thought sickened her and she had no appetite for her dinner. She barely ate any food.

When Ward came into the room, she knew by the look on his face that he had inspected the tray Sophia had returned to the kitchen. He came to the side of the bed and stood looking down at her.

"Your tray was scarcely touched. Couldn't you have managed a little bit more? The more you eat the sooner you'll get your strength back, *pequena*."

"Yes, doctor." The tawny eyes were having the most disturbing effect on her senses. "I wish you wouldn't call me names I don't understand." She hadn't meant to sound cross but it came out that way.

A faint smile touched his lips. "What do you think I called you?"

The sound of the softly spoken words sent shivers along her spine and she had the strangest curling sensation in the pit of her stomach that was fear or apprehension, she couldn't be sure which. Making an effort to control the situation with humor, she gave a nervous little laugh.

"Dingbat?" She felt a small triumph at speaking the word so lightly.

He laughed "The word I used was complimentary. You must learn to speak Spanish if you want to know everything I say."

She smiled and looked relaxed, but her brain was spinning. All sorts of wild thoughts were whirling around in her head. She wanted to say, 'Are you going to marry Francisca?' Instead she said, "What bit me to make me so sick?"

"It could have been one of many things. Mexico is full of poisonous insects."

She shuddered. "I could have been dead. Thank you for saving me."

Lying there small and still, with his eyes on her, her pulse began to hammer heavily. A strange sense of awareness of him sent a warm glow through her whole being.

For a moment neither one said anything and it was as if the two of them were frozen there in time, waiting for something to happen. Then Ward began to pace around the room, stopping to move aside the curtains so he could gaze out the window. Meredith felt panic grip her as she realized that he might marry soon and she would be out of his life forever.

"I'll send Sophia in to help you get ready for a good night's sleep," Ward finally said. "Tomorrow or the next day, or when you are feeling up to it, we're going to have a good long talk about your past, Merry. And... your future."

He went to the door. With his hand on the knob he turned around. "I don't know if there is a Spanish word for dingbat." He waited to see her grin, then went through the door and closed it softly behind him.

Meredith slept fitfully through the long night. Her mind refused to allow her to rest. Try as she might, she could not fully assimilate the words Ward had spoken to her. Her future. It could only mean some arrangements were being made for her to leave the *hacienda*. Words, thoughts, emotions, all whirled around in her mind. Morning came and she was tired, but her leg felt somewhat better.

After Sophia removed the breakfast tray, Ward came to visit her. After he checked her leg, and placed a hand on her forehead to see whether the fever had subsided, he turned away and crossed the deep carpet to the window. She looked at his back. He was as handsome and commanding from behind as he was from the

front. Well...not quite. His eyes made all the difference. When they were unsmiling, his arrogance was unnerving.

The moment he turned and walked toward her she knew he had something on his mind. He came to the bed and sat on the edge of it. He stroked a strand of hair behind her ear, where his fingers lingered, their tips against her earlobe.

"Do you think you're still in love with Paul Crowley?"

If he had said she had sprouted horns overnight she wouldn't have been more surprised.

"What...do you know about Paul?"

"You mentioned him when you were delirious. Are you in love with him?"

"No! But if I were, it wouldn't be any of your business!"

He smiled. "I didn't think you were in love with him, but I wanted to hear you say it." He removed his hand from her ear. "Are you content with your life, Merry?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, mystified.

"Do you ever wish for a home, a family, and security?"

She was silent, her eyes stunned and wide.

"I'm no different from anyone else. I suppose that's what most of us want."

"I'm an impatient and busy man, Merry. And I realize that sometimes I'm not a very kind one. But when I make up my mind about something I like to act as quickly as possible. I think it would be to your advantage and to mine if we were married. How does the idea strike you?"

She looked at him as if he had just dropped from outer space. "It strikes me as insane. You're not in love with me and I'm not in love with you." Yet as she spoke the words, she knew that, at least as far as her feelings were concerned, they weren't true.

He looked at her and then away.

"You're wishing for that old-fashioned relationship between one man and one woman, Merry. To be honest with you, I think that storybook, idealistic love is doomed to extinction. It's better to grow into love with someone you respect. One with whom you share mutual attraction. I don't repulse you. I can tell that much."

The cool assumption stung. She glared up at him. "You must know that marriage between two people from different lifestyles, who scarcely know each other, wouldn't work. How could you possibly be considering taking me into your family? You don't know anything about me."

"I know everything about you. I've made quite a few phone calls and I know about the foster homes you've been in, your aptitude in school, your excellence as an X-Ray technician. I also know about your...friendship with Paul Crowley who used you to support his expensive tastes, and about your unhappiness when he left you."

Meredith wished she could die. The bastard! That he could pick up the telephone and lay bare every private aspect of her life made her hate him.

"That is the most malicious thing anyone has ever done to me in my whole life! How dare you pry into my background? You had no right!" Tears of embarrassment and humiliation ran down her cheeks. "You've no right to drag my life out for ridicule!" She was crying and the sobs were shaking her voice.

"That was the last thing on my mind, Merry. I most certainly am not ridiculing your life. You have conducted yourself admirably. All I learned about you convinced me more than ever that I want you for my wife. You're beautiful, intelligent woman with good taste and charming manners. You're a good influence on Maggie. I believe you will be an asset to

my home, and in return I'm prepared to take care of you, be a faithful husband and an attentive father. That seems to me to be a sound basis for a happy and lasting marriage."

"I can't believe you! Why? Why do you want to do... this?"

"That's a fair question. I want Maggie to have a mother. I want a home to come back to with more than a houseful of paid servants in it. I want companionship. I want a woman in my home to make love to and a son I can watch grow into a man."

"Then why don't you marry the Mexican girl? It's what your grandmother wants."

"I don't happen to like Francisca. As many hours as I will spend with my wife, I want one that I at least like."

"Am I to take that as a compliment?"

"That is the way I meant it."

A warmth ran over his skin, for he gave his words a sensual meaning.

"I don't expect you to give me your answer right this minute, Merry. Think about it." Then abruptly he moved and gathered her into his arms. His mouth had found hers before she could turn her head. It was not merely a light kiss of affection. He kissed her as though she were a woman with whom he would share more intimate caresses. She opened her lips to his as the intimacy of the kiss increased and felt a strange helplessness in her limbs, as if his sensuous mouth were absorbing her.

"We'll be good together, Merry. It's a start." The muttered words were barely coherent, thickly groaned in her ear as he kissed the bare warm curve of her neck.

"I think you'd better go." The strangled voice sounded miles from her ears.

He cupped a hand behind her head and pressed hard fingers under the disarray of her hair and drew her flushed face onto his shoulder.

"It was unfair of me to spring this on you now. I should have waited for you to get your strength back. Rest and I'll come back this evening." He stroked a strand of her hair behind her ear as he had done before and stood up. When he left, she ran the tip of her tongue around the velvety innerside of her lips as he had done minutes before and her heart gave a disturbing throb. Oh, God! Why did she suddenly feel like she was in the ocean swimming against the tide?

Ward's parting kiss left Meredith prey to a thousand conflicting emotions. At first she felt outrage that he would even suggest a marriage of convenience. And yet, the burning memory of his embrace sent delicious tremors through her still feverish body. Also, she found herself weighing the pain and disillusionment of the last few months, the loneliness she had known for most of her life, against the possibility of luxurious content as his wife. And yet this was wrong. He didn't believe in love. How could such a marriage work?

Ward came back that evening and stood beside her, larger than life, looking deeply into her eyes.

"Well?"

The single word of inquiry exploded in Meredith's brain and for a moment she could not speak. Her well-rehearsed words died in her throat as a wave of longing, almost violent in its intensity, took their place. In a barely audible whisper, she heard herself telling Ward that she would be his wife.

He took her chin between his thumb and forefinger and, tilting it, looked down into her eyes.

"You won't regret this decision, Merry. I know you're still dreaming of a prince on a white charger who will sweep you away to his castle where there will be no more heartaches, no more problems."

Life isn't like that, Merry *mia* as you well know. If there were no heartaches, how would we know when we are happy?"

His words stayed with her for a long time after he left her.

Meredith sat beside Ward in his Mercedes, shocked that the past week had flown by almost as fast as the landscape was flying past now. Later today they would be married in a small church in San Antonio.

"What will your grandmother say about... us?" she asked as he drove toward the airport. It was a subject they hadn't discussed.

Ward answered her question openly and frankly. "I telephoned her this morning and told her. She is upset. But remember this, Merry. Her opinion or anyone else's means nothing to me. I am my own person. I make my own decision. I please myself."

Meredith leaned back in the seat and drew in a deep breath. "Are you always so frank?"

"Not always, but I will be with you. I want no secrets between us."

They talked off and on after that, but impersonally, about the land, the birds, the flowers.

"Guadalajara has one of the most ideal climates in the world," Ward said. "The temperature hovers between fifty-eight and seventy-two degrees the year around. Many Americans retire here."

Meredith didn't wonder that people wanted to retire to this beautiful setting. But how had she become blessed with the possibility of living here most of her life?

She looked at him with a smile in her eyes and wondered fleetingly when the beautiful coach she was riding in was going to turn back into a pumpkin.

A guard tipped his hat as they passed through a private gate at the airport. Ward drove the Mercedes up to within a

short distance of a silver plane and stopped.

They went up the steps to the plane together, but when they reached the door he stood aside so she could enter. It was like walking into a sitting room. She turned to Ward. Quite suddenly she was aware of nervousness, of uncertainty, of a number of nameless doubts.

"This is yours? We're going to fly in this? Alone?"

He met her tormented glance with puzzlement before he smiled. "Not alone. The pilot is going with us. Are you afraid of flying?" He searched her face.

Meredith was not fearful about the short flight, but she was beginning to grasp the reality of Ward Sanderson's wealth. How would she bridge the gap from her world to his? How could she possibly stand beside this man as his wife?

"Ward!" She looked at him now with a look that blended confusion and fear. "Let's talk about this. I'm not sure... I don't fit in! I've not been anywhere or done anything that would make me interesting to your friends. I've no experience, no... polish. I've never even given a... party!"

"A party?" He placed his arm around her and his voice was sharp in her ear. "Who in the hell cares about a party? You're wrong about yourself, Merry. You'd be an asset to any man. You're you, Merry, and that's part of your charm. My life isn't as glamorous as you probably think it is. I have this plane because my work makes it necessary, not because I'm a jet-setter."

Meredith said nothing for a long moment, then turned tiredly and rested her forehead against his arm.

"If this doesn't work out, Ward, or if you meet someone, fall in love, and want to marry, this... arrangement doesn't have to last forever." Her voice was muffled and she felt stupidly close to tears.

"And if you should meet someone, you'll tell me? I'm hoping we'll be able to talk to each other about everything, Merry." He held her and swayed softly. In his arms, she felt safe.

Her answer was almost breathless. "I will. I promise I will."

Their eyes met. Hers were bright with tears, his gentle, questioning. It seemed both an end and a beginning for them.

Ward's kiss was quick and firm. He raised his head and grinned. His voice, when he spoke, was husky.

"I think that bears repeating."

His face came to hers and he kissed her longer and harder. The first time her lips had been compressed with surprise, but now they were soft and yielding. Her palms rested on his chest before they moved around to his back and she hugged him to her. He raised his head. They looked into each other's eyes and exchanged another smile. She was happy. God, she was happy! Back in the secret recess of her mind, though, she knew it wouldn't last, couldn't last. It was too beautiful. When it ended she would adjust . . . She always had.



The sun shone warmly on Meredith's wedding day, its brilliance touching everything including the diamonds clipped to her ears and the magnificent pearl and diamond choker Ward fastened around her slender neck moments before they left the hotel room. She looked beautiful and stately as she approached the flower-decked altar in the large, almost empty church.

Ward had taken care of everything. All Meredith had to do was sign her name to the marriage certificate. The ceremony itself was simple and the minister spoke his words solemnly.

It all seemed so unreal to Meredith, like Cinderella going to the ball. But this was no ball, she quickly reminded herself—it

was her wedding day! This day she was joining her life to that of a rich, handsome, storybook prince. Would she wake up to find herself back in a foster home, with only a life filled with loneliness stretching out before her?

At the end of the ceremony Ward bent down and brushed her cold lips with his, and took her hand and interlaced his fingers with hers. Suddenly, she was terrified, thinking about the enormity of the step she had taken. But Ward tightened his hold of her and led her out of the church, to the hotel where they would spend their brief honeymoon.

"Well, Mrs. Sanderson?" Ward said when they were alone in the hotel room.

Meredith tried to remain calm. "Well, Mr. Sanderson?" The small laugh she tried refused to come convincingly. Soundlessly he moved to put his hands on her shoulders. Her heart gave a choking, little thump and she raised a tremulous gaze to his face.

"You were very beautiful today. No man could have been more proud of his bride than I was."

Her lashes dropped and her cheeks felt warm.

"Blushes, Merry? I do believe you're genuinely without vanity." His brows were raised in amusement. "I suspect you have unexpected depths, Merry. And before many weeks have passed I will have explored every single one of them."

She stood there, silently, watching him. He took her hand and led her to the bedroom door.

"The bath is all yours. I'll be waiting for you."

While she ran her bath and undressed, she wondered how many women Ward had slept with and how often he would expect to make love to her. Her sexual experience was limited and had only left her feeling frustrated and used. Would Ward be sweeter to her? What did he expect of

her? She felt nervous and full of doubts.

She bathed, towed herself until she was properly dry, and slipped a prim blue nightgown over her head.

When she walked back into the bedroom, Ward lay on the bed, his hands behind his head, a single sheet pulled up to his bare chest. He eyed her without moving.

Her eyes flicked over him and hurried away. A wild, sweet enchantment rippled through her veins and wordlessly she went to him, and put her hand in his. He moved slightly and made room for her to sit beside him.

"Merry." When he said her name it was a caress. He ran his hand up and down her arm. Finally he said "I want you to want me, Merry. Anything else leaves me cold. I won't insist if you're not in the mood."

She almost wanted to cry. The knowledge that he wasn't trying to rush her into fulfilling an obligation brought a welling of love, and tremulous joy. No words would come so she reached out a hand and switched off the bedside lamp and slipped into the sheets beside him.

His arms were waiting for her and pulled her trembling body against his. They lay quietly for a long while, until her trembling ceased. Then he began to stroke her, his hands uncovering her body slowly, achingly, until she lay naked, soft and warm beside him.

"Sweet Merry. Sweet marshmallow Merry."

He leaned over her, his breath warm and moist, his face a blur in the soft light. She touched the tip of her tongue delicately against his mouth. They kissed hungrily, and explosive desire opened between them.

"Do you want me?" The muttered words were barely coherent, thickly groaned into her ear.

"Ward, Ward... I..."

He seemed to understand. With a swift look into her face he took her mouth again. He kissed her as openly and intimately as a man could kiss a woman. She arched against him, her hands moving over the smooth muscles of his back. She had never felt anything like the sensual enjoyment she was feeling now. She moved against him, clutching at his back while he pressed into her. She wrenched upward and tensed, wanting to know and have every little bit of him. His weight pressed her slimness into the mattress, and her arms tightened about him as they rode out the storm.

When it was over he lay beside her and muttered, "Yes, yes," as if she had said something. She sighed in contentment. In the soft cocoon of the bed her doubts and fears had dissolved, and her body drowsed, luxuriating in this new and wondrous sensation. He looked down at the pale luminous oval of her face.

"Your eyes have lights in the dark. Did you know that?"

She shook her head and raised a hand to his cheek. "Ward, I'm not very experienced. I've done this only a very few times."

He was still for a long moment. Then he pulled her close and held her for a long time. He whispered softly in her ear as she ran her hands over his back. You were wonderful. But my pleasure is greater when I give you pleasure. Did you enjoy it?"

"Yes! Oh, yes!" She framed his face with her hands and reached for his lips. This moment was hers; nothing or no one could ever take that from her.

"Go to sleep now, Merry. The sweetest sleep in the world comes now."

She found that it did. She fell asleep almost immediately, but all night she was subconsciously aware of the warm, male body pressed to her own, the heavy weight of the arm across her body and the hand

that cupped her breast. It was a wonderful way to sleep.

Their honeymoon was right out of a romantic novel. Although it only lasted four days and four wonderful, glorious nights, it was the kind of honeymoon that comes at the end of the story when love triumphs and the couple walk off into the sunset.

By the time they left San Antonio Meredith knew beyond a doubt that she had fallen utterly and completely in love with Ward. The knowledge filled her with joy but also with sadness, because she was fully aware that Ward didn't love her in the same romantic way. Would she be able to bear that reality?

On their way back to Guadalajara, the couple stopped to pay a visit to Ward's grandmother at the Rancho Margarieta.

When they reached the *hacienda* they were met by a very old woman in a long black dress.

Ward was hugged like a favorite son. He gently kissed the wrinkled cheek and introduced Meredith.

"This is Saldana, and she has been with my grandmother for many years. They are about the same age." He explained this to Meredith, then spoke more slowly to the woman. "Is my grandmother well, Saldana?"

She made a gesture with her hands. "Ah, *si*. But it is *siesta* time. Take your bride up to rest. I will tell your *abuela* that you have brought your new *esposa* to her. Do not be surprised if she is angry." The old woman laughed. "But not as angry as Francisca, no?"

Saldana's frankness caused questions to swirl through Meredith's mind. How was she going to face this hostile grandmother? Would she feel, once again, like the unwanted child thrust into a foster home? Pride surfaced. No, by damn! If the old lady didn't like her, tough!

"Don't worry," Ward said later on, as he led her to his grandmother's room. "She's disappointed that I didn't marry Francisca, who is a distant relative, and often stays here at the *hacienda*. But when she gets to know you it will be all right. She's really a softy where I'm concerned. You'll see."

"I hope so."

But her uneasiness grew as they walked down the broad, carpeted steps. What thoughts were going through his head, she wondered? How was she going to bear up under the strain of living with him, knowing he only liked her and was more than satisfied with their sexual relationship, but didn't love her? Would the decision she made to marry him demand more of her than she would be able to bear?

They came to high, double doors and Ward put his hand on the ornate knob.

"Just be yourself. You look beautiful," he murmured.

They walked into a cool, quiet room. At first Meredith thought it was empty because the small lady in the dark dress sitting on the large chair blended with her surroundings.

With her hand firmly clasped in his Ward led her forward, then bent and kissed the old lady's cheek.

"Here she is, Grandmother. I told you she was beautiful." His voice was soft, almost reverent.

Very dark, bright eyes looked steadily at Meredith and she looked steadily back. Instinct told her this woman would look with contempt on any one who stood meekly, passively, under her stare. She pulled her hand from Ward's and held it out to the woman who sat so stoically.

"I'm glad to meet you, *senora*." It seemed to Meredith she held her hand out for ages before the woman's hand came out to meet it. The clasp was firm but didn't linger.

"Sit down." She was still looking at

Meredith and her words were more of a command than an invitation. Meredith walked back a few steps to an identical high-backed chair, but before she sat down the woman said to Ward, "leave us." His eyes told her he wouldn't go if she wanted him to stay. She smiled at him.

"I think your grandmother and I should get to know one another on a woman-to-woman basis, darling. Do you mind?" She sat down in the heavy, straight chair, her feet just comfortably reaching the floor.

"Not if that's what you want, sweetheart." He bent over her and dropped a kiss on her cool lips before walking away.

A calmness had come over Meredith. She looked into the cool, dark eyes and smiled.

Ward's grandmother came directly to the point.

"I wanted my grandson to marry a Mexican." The words were firmly and calmly spoken.

"I know. Ward told me."

"American women do not strive for family unity. They are interested only in being liberated. They do not know how to be submissive to their husbands. Submissiveness is not an American trait."

Meredith looked at her quietly. "That is true. However, submissiveness means different things to different people. To me it means yielding to authority, and for this world to survive we must have authority. To others it may mean admitting to being inferior, being humble, meek, submitting oneself to dominance without any effort to control one's own destiny. The latter meaning does not apply to me, *senora*."

The *senora's* face gave no inkling of what she was thinking. The dark eyes continued to look at her. She was a true aristocrat, Meredith decided.

"Do you love my grandson or did you

marry him because he is rich?"

The question caught Meredith unaware and she sat silently for a moment before she spoke.

"*Senora*, I will tell you frankly that I married him because I yearned for someone of my own, a family. Since the wedding, however, I have come to love him very much. He is the man I dreamed about when I was a child—kind, loving, dependable, protective. The fact that he is rich just happens to be an added factor and can very well be more of a hindrance to my happiness than a benefit."

"I want him to be happy. He tells me he loves you. I'll have to accept you."

"Thank you, *senora*. I'll try not to be a disappointment to you. I want Ward to be happy, too. I hope that can be a basis for a friendship between us."

"We will have coffee." The old woman took a small, silver bell from her pocket, and rang it. In a few minutes a young girl pushed a noiseless teacart into the room.

When Ward returned, they were drinking coffee and chatting easily. He came to her and reached for her hand. She looked up at him with all the love in her heart in her eyes, forgetting, momentarily, that his grandmother was watching. She got to her feet and he pulled her close to him. Snapping black eyes, undimmed by eighty-two years, watched intently.

"I will send for you when the meal is ready," she said to Meredith, dismissing her briskly. "Ward and I have much to talk about."

Ward squeezed Meredith's hand then she went to the door.

"I am an old woman and have not long to wait for a grandson." The words reached Meredith as she left the room and her lips lifted into a grin.

She had quite liked the aristocratic old lady. The interview had gone much better than she had hoped, and there was a lightness to her step as she went up the

stairs to the room she would share with Ward.

At the top of the stairs she came to an abrupt halt. A woman stood there glaring at her with the same snapping, black eyes as Ward's grandmother. Meredith almost took a step backward, the woman's hatred was so obvious.

This must be Francisca, she realized. Meredith almost felt sorry for her. But pity left as soon as the woman spoke.

"You'll never be accepted. A nobody from nowhere! He only married you because he was angry with *Tia* Margarieta for insisting he make our . . . relationship legal in the eyes of the church. Nothing will be changed between us." The words were said with such contempt that a chill crept over Meredith's skin.

"Really?" Anger warmed her.

"I have known Ward since childhood. I was groomed to take my place beside him as his wife."

"Groomed since childhood?" Meredith looked her up and down insolently. "You mean even then no one thought you'd be able to find a husband on your own?"

She stepped around her and went into her room, closed the door, and leaned against it. She was breathless with anger but rather proud that her parting shot had rendered Francisca speechless.

She took deep breaths to calm herself and began to dress for dinner. By the time Ward came to the room she was calm. He looked her up and down and smiled.

"Grandmother is not quite so sure I made as disastrous a mistake as she first thought. You must have held your own with her."

"I tried. She's naturally concerned for your happiness. I can't fault her for that."

She caught the sparkle in his eyes. Happiness engulfed her like a tidal wave and washed Francisca's words from her mind.

She was actually beginning to think of herself as his wife, his love. Careful, she cautioned. This was all so new and heady she must not forget that he once ridiculed the "old-fashioned" relationship between one man and one woman.

"Don't let Francisca get under your skin." He was coming toward her with the box containing the diamond earrings and necklace she had worn at the wedding. "She is very close to my grandmother and will be around a lot. You might as well get used to her."

Meredith went slightly numb on hearing this news, but managed a faint smile. Ward put the necklace around her throat and she took the earrings from his hand and clipped them to her ears.

"Grandmother wore these at her wedding. I want her to see you wearing them tonight."

"Ward, no! She might resent—"

"No, she won't. She knows we're married. The diamonds were to go to my bride." His mouth curved at one corner. "As far as grandmother is concerned we are married forever. She doesn't believe in divorce."

"I feel as though we're deceiving her." The words came slowly.

"Why?"

"You know . . . when we talked, we agreed that we might not . . . stay together always."

His voice was uncompromising, unfriendly. "As a matter of fact, I don't believe in divorce myself."

Meredith had gone white. "But, you said that. . ."

"Are you sorry already, Merry?"

"About what?" she was dumbfounded. Why were they quarreling?

"About marrying me?" He was looking at her as if he seemed to believe that she was deceiving him in some way.

"No!"

Now was not the time to tell him that

she was frightened because he didn't believe in romantic love. And terrified that he was having an affair with Francisca. She couldn't tell him anything.

I still don't know him, she whispered soundlessly to herself when he turned away from her to go into the adjoining bathroom.

She was standing beside the window looking down into the courtyard when he came back into the room. She heard him rummaging about in his suitcase, then felt his presence beside her.

"It'll take me forever—can you put these in for me?" He held out gold cuff links. All traces of irritation were gone from his face. She smiled up at him and with fumbling fingers attached the cuff links.

When she was finished, he leaned toward her and kissed her very lightly on the nose.

"It's getting to be a habit," he said.

"What is?"

"Wanting to kiss you." He said it lightly, jokingly, and it was hard to keep from communicating all the love she wanted to give him. She covered her confusion with a light laugh and twisted away from him.

They entered the dining room with her hand tucked firmly in the crook of his arm. Ward's grandmother was seated at the table and next to her stood Francisca. There was no mistaking the hostility in her eyes.

Ward's arm slid around her, possessively, and he urged her toward the two women. "Darling, I want you to meet Francisca Calderon."

Meredith forced her stiff lips to smile and nodded to the woman.

"Francisca, my wife, Meredith."

The red lips barely moved. "*Senora.*"

Ward bent to kiss his grandmother's cheek and on impulse Meredith did the same. The old lady looked long and hard at her before she smiled. "The necklace

becomes you. Did Ward tell you I wore it on my wedding day?"

"Yes, he did, *senora*. And I was proud to wear it on mine."

It was not as difficult a meal to get through as Meredith had anticipated. Ward made sure she was included in the conversation and as time went on and Francisca remained silent, it became easier.

Ward's grandmother left them as soon as dinner was finished. Ward walked her to her room and Meredith, not wanting to remain alone with Francisca, walked out into the large entrance hall and went up the stairs to her room.

Her honeymoon was almost over. Tomorrow they would go back to the *hacienda* and perhaps by the end of the week to Tulsa. She had almost succeeded in banishing the doubt that she was incapable of filling the position demanded of Ward's wife. The last four days had been the most wonderful days of her life and anything that could happen to her in the future would pale in comparison.

She was standing beside the window when she heard Ward's voice from the veranda beneath the window.

"That's nonsense, Francisca." His voice was biting in the way it could be when he was out of patience.

"But why did you do it, Ward? Why did you marry that...?"

"I don't have to justify my actions to you. I never gave you any reason to believe I'd marry you."

"Are you in love with her, *querido*?"

There was the briefest of hesitations, then, "that need not concern you. Our relationship has not changed, Francisca. Meredith will not interfere."

"I don't want *her* to know." Francisca had a sob in her voice.

"She won't know unless you tell her. I don't know what you're worrying about. I'll take care of you. You know that. But

you must adjust to this new situation."

"I hate her!" This was hissed with fiery venom.

Ward laughed. "Well, I don't."

"Tell me you don't love her?"

Softly and patiently Ward said, "Francisca, I don't think that need concern us..."

The words trailed away. They were moving into the house.

The word "us" echoed in Meredith's brain, as, white-faced and sick at heart, she turned and went to the bathroom. There, the door locked behind her, she took great sobbing breaths while she fought for control. It was quite obvious there was something going on between Ward and Francisca.

She had wanted so desperately to believe that he would come to love her as she loved him. Now she feared that he never intended to be a faithful husband at all. She stared at her white face in the mirror. You are a gullible, dumb... broad, Meredith Moore! Tell him to bug off, you don't need him. Her eyes filled again. What if she was wrong? Either way, she couldn't let him go.

Later, when she had gone to bed, Ward came into the room. "What's the matter, Merry?" He sat down beside her. "Do you have a headache?"

She nodded and pressed her hands to her temples. She wanted to scream *liar*! Instead she gritted her teeth and whispered almost inaudibly, "Let me sleep. I'll be all right in the morning."

"Sure. Go to sleep."

Ward got up, undressed and came back to lie next to her, putting his arm around her. She felt his kiss on her shoulder before he settled back and was almost instantly asleep, his breathing coming gently against her neck.

The flight to Guadalajara the next morning was worse than she had expected. To

her dismay, Francisca had come along, having supposedly some business to take care of in Guadalajara.

When they arrived at the hacienda, Meredith went straight up to the room she'd occupy with Ward. She unpacked and then picked up the ornate wooden box holding the earrings and necklace. She couldn't resist opening the box and looking at them. They were so beautiful, but not for her. She snapped the box shut and placed it on the stand beside the bed.

With nothing to do she paced the room, stood beside the window, and looked down on the courtyard. Her nerves were strung as tight as a bow-string.

The situation was unbearable. She finally made a decision. She would tell Ward when they reached Tulsa that she now felt their marriage was a mistake and that she wished to terminate it.

She was sitting beside the window when Ward came into the room. He looked at her like a stranger, his face turned to ice.

"There's someone downstairs to see you," he said. "A Dr. Paul Crowley."

"For a moment she was speechless. "Paul? Here? I can't believe it! What does he want?" she asked through stiff lips.

"How in the hell do I know? Go on down and see." She went to the door, but his next words stopped her. "He came about a week late, didn't he?"

She turned to look at him, opened her mouth to say something, thought better of it, and went out the door. Her mind was spinning wildly. What in the world was Paul doing here? And how did he know where to find her?

She descended the steps and overheard voices coming from the library. It was Paul talking with Francisca. She stood at the door and watched them for a moment. Paul was putting on all his charm for Francisca, and she was clearly looking impressed. How could she have devoted

four years of her life to this shallow, conceited man?

He saw her. "Meredith. How nice it is to see you again."

"Hello, Paul."

Francisca threw her a vicious look and left the room.

Paul came to her and took her hand before she could step away from him. "I've missed you! I didn't realize how much you meant to me until you left me."

Meredith jerked her hand from his and moved a few feet away from him.

"Stop it! I know all your acts. I'm through with you, Paul. I'm married now, but I'm sure you knew that when you came here."

He was quiet for a long moment. Then he looked at her arrogantly. "I'll have to admit you're smarter than I gave you credit for. You married a rich man and you should be able to get a hefty divorce settlement. Face it, darling. There will be a divorce. You don't have the polish to hack this sort of life."

She felt like hitting him. "How did you find me?"

"Maude Fiske. Who else? She came through with the news you had married Tulsa's favorite son. Well, maybe not the favorite, but certainly one of the richest."

"Is that why you're here? You thought to go through me to get to Ward's money?"

"Of course I came to get money. You owe me, you know. After all, I did contribute to our *joint* income. I want what you have in the savings account." His mouth twisted cruelly.

She was shocked almost speechless. "You didn't save one cent of what I have in the savings account and you know it."

"Stop hedging. I want the money. I need it."

"And if I don't give it to you?"

"Then I will feel it is my obligation to warn your husband that you are a nym-

phomaniac and were discharged from the clinic for sleeping with the male patients."

"Ward wouldn't believe you!"

"It doesn't matter if he were to believe me or not. Francisca would. She would spread it among the family. The people in Tulsa would believe it. You'd be black-balled! Ward Sanderson and his bride would be on every scandal sheet in the country. He'll wish he'd never set eyes on you."

"I never, in my wildest dreams, thought you were this vile, this corrupt."

"Now you know. So, are you going to get me the money?"

Meredith was shaken, heartsick; not because of his words but because she had been such a gullible, blind fool.

"I'll get my purse and give you a check," she said wearily, hearing the defeat in her own voice.

She ran upstairs and was soon back with her purse. She sat down at the desk, wrote him a check, and handed it to him. "Take it and get out. I hope I never have to see you again." From somewhere inside her hate and fury hardened her voice.

"You'll see me again. Never doubt that. Stay married to your sugar daddy for as long as you can, sweetie. I'll expect regular donations..."

She clenched her fists. "You won't get another cent from me."

"Not you, darling. Your husband, Ward Sanderson. Play your cards right and he can make us both happy. Hang in there, now, and I'll see you soon."

When he was gone, Meredith ran up the stairs, closed the door and rested against the paneling, too stricken to be aware of her surroundings. She took deep breaths and awareness came rushing back. Ward would want some answers. She had to think. She went to the bathroom and bathed her face with a wet cloth, retouched her make-up and returned to the bedroom to see Ward coming in

the door, her purse in his hand.

"You left this on the desk."

"Thank you." She took the purse from him, placed it on the bureau, and picked up her hairbrush.

"Meredith!"

The voice was loud, harsh, and cut across the room like a whip. She stared at him silently.

"Were you so upset to see him go that you ran up here to hide?"

"I was glad to see him go. I never want to see him again."

"Don't lie." There was something strange in his voice. Accusation? He came close to her and her eyes were level with his chin. "What did he want, Merry?"

Suddenly she was tired of it all. Exhausted. Tired of being pushed by Paul, by Francisca, by...him! She felt as if someone had stuck a knife in her and was slowly twisting it.

"I don't want to tell you!" The words burst from her angrily.

An interminable silence filled the room. She knew that the fragile hope she had secretly nourished that perhaps he might give up Francisca and come to love her had just vanished.

"Well. At least we're being honest." That couldn't be hurt in his voice. She glanced up to see a nerve pulsing beside his eye.

Wearily she turned from him. She wanted to go home. Home? Where was that? Her eyes filled with tears and overflowed down on her cheeks.

"Do you mind if I lie down for a while?"

"Go ahead. I won't stop you."

The door closed behind him and she was alone. It was a relief; she could cry now. There was no one to see her. She lay down on the bed and cried herself to sleep.

She awakened during the night and lay staring into the darkness. She was alone.

How strange, she mused, that after sleeping beside Ward for such a short time she could feel so alone without him beside her. It had not taken him long to return to his old love, she thought bitterly, and tears once again began to slide down her cheeks.



All through the next day, Ward was gone with Francisca to Guadalajara. Meredith devoted the day to Maggie. She and Maggie ate alone in the evening as Ward hadn't returned even for dinner.

It was late at night, and she was already in bed, when the door opened and the lights were switched on, blinding her momentarily. She sat up, clutching the bedclothes to her. Ward closed the door and came to stand in the middle of the room. His face was completely colorless and the small pulse beside his eyes was throbbing in a way she had seen before when he was upset.

She drew in a deep, quivering breath. "What is it, Ward?" When he didn't answer, fear burgeoned inside her and she dug her nails into her palms and tried to think what dreadful news could make him look like this. The silence went on and she couldn't stand it. "What is it? What's happened?"

He was close to the bed now, staring down at her as if he despised her. "Something very unpleasant has happened. The diamond earrings are missing." The words came out of the frozen mask that was his face. "Would you have any idea where they might be?"

"The... earrings?" The words hung in the air. "I... don't know." She looked at the table where she had placed the box when she took it from her suitcase the day before. It wasn't there. "Didn't you put them away? I don't have them."

"I know you don't have them. Until this afternoon Paul Crowley had them."

"What are you talking about?"

Wearily, Ward put his hand in his pocket, drew it out and held it palm up. The earrings lay in his palm. From his other pocket he brought out a folded sheet of paper.

"Dr. Crowley apparently got cold feet. He returned the diamonds to my office this afternoon by special courier along with this letter. Read it for yourself." He tossed it down, but didn't move away.

She unfolded the paper with trembling fingers, and began to read. "Dear Mr. Sanderson: No doubt you will be surprised to find enclosed your wedding gift to your bride. Had I realized the value of the earrings, I would not have accepted them when Meredith insisted that I take them as payment of money she owes me. I am returning them to you for safekeeping. I sincerely hope that your relationship with Meredith will not be concluded as mine was, with possessiveness and jealousy threatening my career. Dr. Paul Crowley."

The paper fluttered from Meredith's numb fingers and for a moment she was speechless, unable to believe that Paul would have concocted such a story. Then it came to her that he was capable of it, but...

"How did he get the earrings?" she whispered hoarsely.

"I was hoping you would tell me."

My God, Ward was as good as accusing her of the theft! She was engulfed in such horror and rage that she scarcely knew what she was saying.

"So you believe your wife is a thief?" she shouted.

"I never said that—I'm just asking for an explanation."

"How dare you ask me to defend myself," she hissed. "I never would have suspected you as you do me. But that's because...because I love you. You wouldn't understand anything about that, of course."

"Calm down—no one has accused you of anything, but what am I supposed to think? You refuse to tell me a thing about what's really going on between you and that Crowley."

Meredith returned to the bed and sat down. Her face crumbled, and tears filled her eyes.

"You're obviously in no shape to talk about anything now." Ward sounded disgusted. "Try to get some sleep and I'll see you in the morning."

Meredith couldn't have answered if she tried. Her eyes were screwed tightly shut, her body wracked by dry, silent sobs. When she managed to open her eyes, he was gone.

In all her life she had never felt such crushing anguish. It was all so horrible. How did Paul get the earrings? What chance did she have of proving she didn't give the earrings to Paul if he said she did? It didn't really matter—she had known the marriage was doomed for days now. Anyway, she had no intention of allowing herself to be humiliated again in the morning. She knew she had to get away and now.

Wearily she got up from the bed and began to collect her belongings. She took only the things she had brought with her, leaving behind her wedding ring and the gifts and clothes Ward had given her on her honeymoon. It was nearly dawn when she finished.

Without a sound she made her way down the stairs, across the foyer, and out into the courtyard. In no time, she had gotten out onto the highway through a gap in the fence. As if by miracle, a car driven by an American couple came by and gave her a ride to the airport. Once there she booked a seat on a flight to Oklahoma City using her credit card. Not until then did she allow herself to think about where she was going or what she would do when she got there. She

couldn't think now—the hurt and humiliation were too raw.

The next two weeks passed by in a haze of pain. For the first three or four days, Meredith sat inside the motel room she had found, and nursed her misery, eating nearly nothing, trying to forget her life in Mexico. Finally, her funds were so low that she had to do something about it. She broke her isolation and found a job as a waitress at a nearby restaurant until she could decide what to do next. The hurt and humiliation receded and gave way to an incredible loneliness. Despite all he'd done to her, she missed Ward dreadfully.

Towards the end of the second week, she decided to call Maude from a public phone. Maude was relieved to her voice and she told her Ward was looking for her. Meredith asked her to give him a message, that she would accept a divorce and would sign any papers he wanted her to. But she refused to tell even Maude where she was. She did not want Ward to find her, not now, not ever again.

One rainy night after work, while hurrying home, she saw a man coming across the street who reminded her of Ward. She turned away. She couldn't bear to look. She didn't want to see anyone or anything that reminded her of Ward.

She shivered and her steps increased. A gust of wind blew rain in her face, almost blinding her. Something hard grabbed her arm, spinning her around. Frightened, she looked up.

"No!" It couldn't be. Ward's tawny eyes staring down at her out of a wet, bleak face! "No!" She said it again.

"Merry." When he spoke she realized he was real and not an apparition.

"Get away from me!" she screamed. "Get away!" Her voice was shrill with the terror that gave her strength to jerk away from him and put her feet into motion. She began to run as if her life depended on it.

She ran in manic flight along the darkened street, till she reached her room. She slammed the door behind her and threw the dead-bolt in place. Her fingers slowly relaxed their hold on the bolt, and she leaned her head against the door. A sharp rap caused her to jerk away from it. The rap came again.

"Let me in, Merry. I want to talk to you. I'm not leaving until you open the door." The pounding that followed jarred the wall.

He was going to wake up all the neighbors. Let him in and get it over with, she reasoned with herself even while she was unbolting the door.

He stood there in the pouring rain, and she stared, eyes large and frightened.

"May I come in?"

She nodded numbly, turned her back on him, and went to the tiny kitchenette. She turned the burner on under the teakettle and set out two mugs. She was pouring the water over the chocolate mix when Ward came up beside her.

"One of those for me? Good! I don't know when I've been so cold."

"I'll sign any divorce papers you wish, Ward. Let's get on with it. I don't want you here."

He sat down and cupped his hands around the mug. "I don't blame you for being bitter, Merry."

"Don't you?"

"I know you didn't take the earrings. I realize you must hate the sight of me, but at least let me tell you what happened and give me a chance to apologize."

"If it will make you feel any better, I accept your apology. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to bow out of your life and get on with mine."

She knew her biting words affected him. His lips tightened and his hand on the cup was shaking.

"The morning after you left, I decided I had to see Crowley myself. I went up to

Rochester. Needless to say, he was surprised to see me. He was as nervous as a cat on a hot tin roof. As it turned out, he knew nothing at all about either the earrings or the letter. But he was so frightened by my appearance that he returned the check you had given him back in Mexico. I'm confident he'll never trouble you again. Anyhow, when I got back to Guadalajara I quickly discovered who had set you up as the thief."

"Francisca." She said it calmly and looked defiantly into his surprised eyes.

"How did you know?"

"She was the only one who hated me enough to do that to me. She was the one who would gain the most if I left. . . ." Her voice cracked and she turned her face away.

"Sophia saw her leaving your room just after you had been there to get your purse. I confronted Francisca and she admitted she took them."

Meredith's laugh was harsh and hollow. "It sounds more like a soap opera all the time. 'Mistress steals diamonds to frame wife of her lover.'"

His face turned a deep red and their eyes did battle.

"If you meant that to be funny, it isn't. I have never been Francisca's lover and wouldn't be if she was the only woman on earth."

"No?" Anger brought her to her feet. "All right. Just to set the record straight, I overheard you talking to Francisca the night we spent with your grandmother. You said and I quote—'Meredith will not interfere with us, she has nothing to do with us, I'll always take care of you. . . nothing has changed between us.' Don't sit there and tell me I didn't hear that with my own ears."

His expression mirrored his astonishment. "You took that to mean she is my mistress?"

"I may be naive, but I'm not stupid! I

was going to ask for a divorce even before you practically accused me of being a thief."

He was quiet for so long that she looked at him and was surprised to see the shadow of pain in his eyes. "Merry." He held out his hand. "Come and sit down and let me tell you about Francisca."

She walked past him and sat down in the chair.

"Francisca's mother was disinherited by my grandmother's father because she married beneath her class. And then, when Francisca was only a little child, her mother died. All her life she's felt she's missed out on something because her connection to the family was so weak. She saw security and status in becoming my wife. That's all there is to it. I don't love Francisca. I have never loved her. But long ago I assumed the responsibility of taking care of her financially. I didn't think our marriage would change that relationship I had with her."

They sat silently, but the tension was alive between them. Meredith felt emotion begin to infiltrate the icy barrier with which she had protected herself. The bitterness she had felt for so long seemed to dissolve in one shuddering sigh, leaving only emptiness.

She stared at him with eyes dilated with pain.

"It's impossible for me to forget you doubted me. Regardless of what evidence anyone had given me about you, it wouldn't have shaken my faith. I'd never have believe you a thief." Her lower lip quivered.

"Perhaps not, but you did believe that I was unfaithful to you, and surely that's much worse. The truth is, Meredith, that you doubted me as much as I doubted you."

She realized that what he said was true. If she hadn't already believed that Ward didn't—couldn't—love her, she never

would have left.

"When we're hurt and angry," Ward continued, "we all say things we don't mean. I was angry and I was hurt and disappointed. I thought you wanted Crowley. Most of all I was angry at myself for allowing my feelings to get so involved with a woman."

He stood up. "I want to be honest with you, Merry. I never believed I'd truly love someone. All the women I met seemed the same. But when I met you I knew you were different." He said it softly and she felt his hand lightly touch her hair. "I knew you would be faithful to me, but even before we were married I wanted more. I wanted your love as well."

She looked up, now, at his unsmiling mouth and with all her heart she wanted to believe him. But conviction refused to come. She got up quickly.

He grabbed her forearms and jerked her toward him. "I can't lose you! We had the beginning of something good. Better than good—wonderful! Like the gold at the end of the rainbow."

Her voice choked on a cry and her face crumbled helplessly. Great tearing sobs shook her, and with a soft groan he pulled her against his chest.

"Don't cry, darling. Don't cry," he said against the top of her head. He held her close, waiting for the storm of tears to

spend itself. "Hurry, darling," she heard him say. "Hurry and stop crying so I can kiss you." Firm fingers raised her chin and a soft handkerchief wiped her eyes and nose, then his lips were on hers.

"I love you," he whispered against her lips. "God, how I love you! I've been through hell these past few weeks. I could have killed Francisca!"

She was trembling and wildly flushed. A corner of her mind still couldn't believe he could love her. She put her hand on his chest and held herself away from him.

"Please... don't say something you don't mean. I couldn't bear it."

"Before God, I love you. I want you for the rest of my life. You *are* my life! I was so wrong about love, darling. It is real. It's both hurtful and wonderful!" Her heart turned over. She closed her eyes and leaned her forehead against his shoulder. "Put your arms around me, darling." There was an anguish in his voice that pierced her like a thorn. "Hold me. Tell me you love me. I need assurance, too."

"I do love you." Her arms went tight around him. "I thought I was going to die from it, I love you so much."

They stood locked together in the middle of the room. Their embrace was like finally coming home, like finding a safe harbor in a storm, truly like reaching the pot at the end of the rainbow. ♥

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On Her Doorstep

When reclusive author, Erin Scott, finds handsome city slicker, Matt Gavin, on the doorstep of her mountain cabin—she does all she can to make him go away. But Matt has seen her private pain and hidden passion and is determined to set her free.

KAY ROBBINS

It wasn't a dead body, Erin thought decidedly. It was breathing.

"It's alive, Chester," she said.

Chester sat down in the dirt, his bloodshot eyes peering at the body with the unfocused look of an alcoholic after a weekend binge. Which was the case.

Erin could sympathize with her companion, but, unlike Chester, her own lack of focus came from a horrendous case of just plain exhaustion.

"You're on my porch," Erin told the body coldly.

The body stirred. A sunbrowned hand reached up to push back a western hat, revealing a lean face from which a pair of bloodshot gray eyes peered at her unhappily.

"This place is empty," he disagreed in a weary voice.

"Only because I wasn't here. I am now. So it isn't empty. Go away."

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He folded his tall length into a sitting position, removed the hat to run fingers through Indian-straight raven hair, replaced the hat firmly but in an oddly unpracticed gesture, and squared his broad shoulders.

He peered past her to see two horses, one a pack horse heavily laden. He sighed, getting to his feet reluctantly. "Well," he said, "since you live here—apparently—maybe you can tell me where to locate someone. I've been looking for two days. They said in town it was a cabin, and this is the only one I found."

"I know nothing about my neighbors."

He regarded her for a moment, then shifted his gaze to Chester. "What in God's name is that?"

Chester lifted a lip at him.

"That," Erin said coldly, "is my dog."

"Somebody's pulling your leg, lady. That's not a dog, it's a mutant grizzly."

Erin felt offended on Chester's behalf, but could hardly cavil at the apt description. Her dog did rather resemble a grizzly. He was very large with a dense coat of grayish-brown hair. And when he yawned—as he did at that moment—he displayed a set of pearly whites that any grizzly would have claimed with pride.

Deciding to ignore the insult to her pet, Erin asked, "How did you get up here?" She looked him up and down adding, "You look like you walked."

He glanced briefly down at himself, at the jeans and flannel shirt liberally coated with dust, then stared at her, ignoring her question. "Mind telling me what a delicate little creature like you is doing out here in the back of beyond?"

Since the three-inch heels of Erin's boots put her at exactly six feet, and since she was what men tended to term "voluptuous," this was clearly sarcasm. Looking up at him (something she didn't often have to do), she said sweetly, "I needed

peace and quiet for my knitting."

A grin tugged at his mouth, but gave up the struggle. "They tell me there are real bears up here, you know. You'd be better off—" He stopped, since she'd turned and gone to her horse. A moment later she was before him again, and he took an involuntary step back.

Erin slid two shells into the shotgun and closed the breech with a quietly deadly snap. She held the gun negligently, the barrel pointed at his belt buckle.

"I'll just get my horse," he murmured.

"Do that." She waited calmly.

He disappeared around the corner of the log cabin, returning a few moments later atop a roan horse with a rather wicked eye. A familiar horse. Erin took due note of the man's obvious unfamiliarity with horses.

"Look, lady," he said, trying again, "I'm just looking for someone in this Godforsaken place. J. D. Mathers. And I'd appreciate it if you—"

Smoothly, Erin raised the shotgun and fired both barrels into the air. The roan, as she'd expected, bolted. She listened to blue curses growing fainter as angry hooves carried horse and rider away, then sighing, she went to begin unloading her things.

Why, she wondered tiredly, was he looking for J. D. Mathers? Nobody looked for Mathers. Not since a curious reporter had bolted back down the mountain some months before with a load of buckshot in his Calvin Kleins.

Erin fed her horses and stabled them, then went into the shed to start up the generator. She returned to the cabin just in time to save the pack Chester was clawing frantically. Carrying the pack into the kitchen area of the roomy cabin, Erin sent a frown back at her whimpering canine

friend as she pulled a half-full bottle of whiskey from the pack and placed it high on a shelf. "You," she told Chester, "are

going on the wagon. Get that? You're five years old and a hopeless alcoholic. It's pathetic. If I ever see Stuart again, I'll shoot him for both of us."

Erin started laughing. It was, curiously, the sound of release. Three years ago she had run bruised and wounded and confused to this mountain cabin, and now she could contemplate, with detachment, killing the cause of all that distant pain. Good. She was over him.

Still, it had been lousy of Stuart to turn Chester into an alcoholic. She was very glad now that she had rescued her dog last year. Kidnapped him, really, while Stuart had been gone from the house.

The refrigerator was getting cold, and Erin went to her radio to call to town. She alerted the grocer with whom she did infrequent business, and Mal promised to send perishables in his battered Jeep. He asked if she could meet the delivery truck and she agreed.

Behind Erin, Chester howled mournfully.

"He's on the wagon again?" Mal asked interestedly.

"Yes," Erin said, "and tell Jake if he slips him whiskey one more time, I'll shoot him."

"Okay," Mal agreed cheerfully. "Jeep'll be at Black Rock at ten in the morning," Mal said. "As usual. Bye, Erin."

She replied in kind, then turned off her radio and yawned. Leaving the small utility room where she kept the radio, she went into the bathroom and turned on the faucet to allow rusty water to escape, waiting for clear. She filled the huge claw-footed tub and dumped in bath salts. Then she slid into the warm water and relaxed. To avoid falling asleep, she forced herself to sit up, soap a cloth and rub busily to remove the dirt from two weeks of camping. She used a hand shower attachment to wash her hair.

When she was clean and glowing, she

climbed reluctantly from the tub, towed off briskly, and dried her long red hair, vaguely aware of Chester making a disinterested comment outside the door. Rummaging in the narrow closet, she located a pair of rather brief black silk pajamas and put them on.

If she had associated clothing with memories, she might have felt odd to still wear garments Stuart had bought for her; fortunately, Erin didn't care. She buttoned the top, reflecting absently that she'd finally gained back the weight she had lost during those tumultuous first months with Stuart; the black silk gaped just a bit over her full breasts.

Then she opened the door and padded out into the living room, nearly tripping over Chester, who looked up at her and commented mildly again. She looked up at the front door for a moment, then back at her dog.

"Some watchdog," she told him.

Erin turned her gaze to the front door, the open front door, and the dusty stranger leaning against the jamb, who was staring at her in some surprise.

"We-e-ll," he said, the word drawled out. "You certainly look different with your—uh—hair down."

"I thought I sent you away," Erin said.

He smiled. "I came back."

Sighing, Erin padded around the low partition that divided kitchen from living room, and poured a cup of coffee. Obviously, she had company for a while. She lifted her cup questioningly at the stranger.

"Thank you." He accepted politely, coming to the other side of the partition.

Erin poured another cup, looked at him in inquiry and was told he took it black, then handed him the cup.

"We got off on the wrong foot," he told her after an appreciative sip of coffee. "My name is Matt Gavin, and I'm from New York. From Salem Publishing.

I'm looking for J. D. Mathers."

"Whoever you may be looking for, you're looking at my pajama top. At, specifically, my bust."

He grinned suddenly, gray eyes that were sheepish lifting to her face. "Sorry," he murmured. "At least—Hell, I'm not sorry. I'm human. And the flannel shirt and jeans you were wearing before didn't even hint—I mean—and your hair, is it—" He stopped suddenly.

"It's real," she told him dryly. "Given my druthers, I wouldn't have chosen red." She paused for a moment, then added gently, "Mr. Gavin, it's difficult to talk to someone who won't look you in the eye."

He seemed to withdraw his gaze with great effort and fixed it on his coffee cup. "Then," he muttered, "button that damned top."

She looked down, swore mildly, and refastened two gaping buttons. "It wasn't intentional," she told him. "I've gained some weight."

"All in the right places." He looked at her and sighed. "You haven't told me your name."

"I didn't know it mattered."

"It's J. D. Mathers, I presume?" His voice was very polite. "Who signs her contracts in the name E. Scott. Which stands for—?"

"Erin." She sighed, aware that she was too tired to cope with this invasion. Aware she would have to cope whether she wanted to or not.

"What," he asked, "is this mania for privacy all about? I mean, granted, you have the right to live alone if you want. But up here? Miles from nothing? You won't talk to us on the phone, you refuse to promote your books—not that they need it—you've refused a dozen invitations to come to New York—"

"Mr. Gavin. It is, as you said, my right to live as I choose. I choose to live here.

Why is none of your business." It was said politely, quietly. Firmly.

He was studying her, his gray eyes nearly as weary as the green ones that looked back at him. He cleared his throat. "About your next book." When she remained politely unresponsive, he tried again. "We're scheduling, and we need a title. And chapters, if possible. For the artwork. The cover."

She looked around the cabin for a moment, then back at him. "Couldn't you have just written a letter?"

"I did. You didn't answer. And, besides—Your last book," he reminded her, "was on every major best-seller list for months. *Months*. In fact, it's still there. People want to see you, hear you, know about you. You won't even release a picture, for godsake."

Erin felt temper creeping. "Mr. Gavin—"

"Matt."

"Whatever. If you'll reread my contracts, you'll find that we got rid of the clauses about promoting books. They can read my books or not, criticize or not, speculate—or not. I don't care. I don't watch television. I don't like cities. And I won't promote the books."

He looked at her, "I'll try to convince you, you know."

"I know." She sighed inaudibly. "But you won't succeed. It'll take time for you to realize that, unfortunately. Pity you won't just take my word for it."

He shook his head. Slowly and firmly.

Erin looked at him and felt even more tired. "But in the meantime, leave. I have got to get some sleep."

"My horse ran away, I'm afraid."

"Take one of mine."

Matt considered the matter. "Look," he said, "we're both tired. And if I have to ride those ten miles back down this mountain today, I'll get myself killed. Have a heart and let me sleep on your

couch.”

“No.”

He looked at her pathetically. “I’d like children someday. If I have to get back on a horse,” he said, “I’ll never be able to father children.”

It surprised a laugh out of her. She realized, while he gazed at her appealingly, that he was determined to stay. She also realized she was too damned tired to argue.

“Oh, hell,” she said. “Take the couch. I’m going to bed.” She turned away and walked down the hall to her bedroom and was, literally, asleep before her head hit the pillow.

Erin awoke at first light, pulled on some jeans and a heavy sweater, and tiptoed toward the kitchen to make some coffee. The sleeping stranger lay on her couch, partly covered by her old afghan. His clothes were neatly folded on the coffee table.

Broad shoulders rose nakedly from the afghan, tanned and strong (sunlamp? she wondered—he was a city man, after all). A thick mat of black hair covered his chest. One powerful arm lay outside the afghan, and one long leg was bared as well.

She found her eyes fixed on the steadily rising and falling chest, and frowned a little. There was an odd weakness in her knees and her breathing seemed to quicken. She fought a sudden urge to touch him.

This is absurd, Erin thought and busied herself starting the coffee, putting the stranger’s dirty clothes in the washing machine, and going to feed and water the horses. She returned to the cabin for a quick cup of coffee and then, after leaving a note, she saddled her horse Amos for the hour’s ride down the mountain to pick up her groceries.

When Erin got back, her guest was in the shower. She set two places at the

breakfast bar and began to fix bacon and eggs and biscuits. The aroma greeted Matt Gavin as he emerged from the bathroom.

“Hello,” said Erin, handing him a cup of coffee. Clean, and shaved, he was more than handsome, he was devastating. It bothered her. Having lived with one extraordinary man, Erin had learned to mistrust extremes. It did no good to remind herself that this man’s extraordinary looks could hardly be compared to Stuart’s incredible, driven talent. Still, she was only too aware that Matt Gavin lived in a high-powered world, and a wound she had believed healed cringed away from the threat of that world.

So the clear, steady gray eyes that looked at her out of that handsome face found no interested awareness in her own gaze. She merely placed food before him, joined him at the bar, and began eating her breakfast.

After a moment he followed suit. Then he sent her a sideways glance. “You’re a good cook,” he noted.

“Thanks.” Erin didn’t look at him.

He tried again. “Thanks for your couch and for washing the clothes, and the shower and breakfast.”

“You’re welcome.”

He laughed suddenly, a short sound that was barely amused. “Hardly. Hardly welcome.”

“You weren’t invited,” she reminded him.

Nothing more was said until the meal was finished. Erin poured more coffee for them, but took hers to the sink as she began cleaning up. Silent, he rose and began helping. She accepted the help matter-of-factly, but didn’t comment on it. When they were finished, she took her cup into the living room, and he followed suit. She sat on one end of the couch; he took the other.

“You have,” he said finally, “gone to some lengths to make this entire morning

painfully impersonal."

"I haven't gone to any lengths at all." She smiled a twisted smile. "I am what I am, Mr. Gavin."

"Matt, for godsake. Calling me by my first name won't strike you mute."

Erin said nothing.

He frowned. "Look, will it kill you to talk to me like a reasonably friendly human being instead of regarding me as something your dog dragged in?"

"Have I done that? Sorry."

"You're so cool." He stared at her, a fixed gaze that probed and searched. "So—unflappable. Even yesterday, when you were tired."

And Erin was surprised to find herself briefly tempted to explain the coolness he commented on, the control. She frowned a bit, not pleased by the impulse, and said, "You should get started back to town. Don't worry about my horse; he's much easier to ride than yours was. When you get to town, just tie the reins to the saddlehorn and let him go. He'll come home."

Matt Gavin slowly finished his coffee, never taking his eyes off her, then reached over to set the cup on the coffee table. Leaning back, he said musingly. "I heard about that reporter you chased off the mountain with a load of buckshot in his pants. Would you do that to me?"

"Do you think I wouldn't?" she asked.

"Oh, I think you would. I think it wouldn't matter to you a bit that I work for the company you write for." He paused, then went on. "What I'm wondering, really, is why. Why you're hiding up here. Why a beautiful, intelligent, talented woman would be so cold."

Erin knew he was trying to provoke her, probing for some reaction from her. She was, again briefly, tempted to tell him just why, but she said nothing.

"How old are you?" he asked abruptly.

"Twenty-eight." No hesitation, no

evasion.

His eyes searched her impassive face. "When you signed the first contract four years ago," he said, "it was in another name. About three years ago, you explained in a letter that your name was now legally Scott." He hesitated. "You were married, weren't you?"

"I was married." She wondered absently why she was answering his questions.

"You're divorced now."

"Yes."

"How long were you married?"

"I lived with my husband for a year."

Erin felt something gathering, tensing, threatening to spring from the dark closet where it lived. Matt Gavin, she realized dimly, was very good at probing and all her instincts were shouting at her. She wanted to get away because when dark things leaped from closets and stood nakedly between two strangers, they couldn't be strangers anymore.

"Just a year? You don't strike me as the kind to give up that easily."

"Sometimes," she said, "it isn't a matter of giving up. Sometimes it's... recognition that there's nothing to fight for. Nothing that matters anymore. Sometimes you just can't keep getting up when you're knocked down."

He frowned. "Do you mean—"

"I don't mean anything." She stood abruptly and carried their coffee cups to the kitchen.

"Erin..."

She started when the voice came from behind her.

"Erin, I don't want to pry, but—"

"Then don't." She turned, suppressing an instinctive physical withdrawal when she saw how close to her he stood. Too close—he was too close to her. Too close to her pain. "Stop asking questions. You turn up on my porch one day and expect the story of my life the next?"

He nodded slowly. "All right, I had that coming. It's really none of my business, is it?"

"It's none of your business," she agreed.

He looked at her intently. There was something in her lovely, wary green eyes, a shadow of some dreadful hurt, and it touched something inside him. Her coloring, that porcelain skin and fiery red hair, suggested passion, but it was a passion that was deeply hidden or perhaps unawakened, and *that* intrigued him.

Everything inside him warned that his only chance was to make an impression on this guarded woman, who was so adept at ridding herself of strangers. He couldn't afford to remain one.

"I'm not normally so inquisitive," he murmured. "It's just that I've never cared for shadow-boxing."

Erin thought she knew what he meant, but asked anyway. "Meaning?"

He crossed his arms over his broad chest and seemed to study her intently. "Well, when a man finds himself interested in a woman, he generally has to contend with her past, because he isn't a part of it."

"You don't waste time with small talk, do you?"

"I can't afford to, can I? At any moment I may find myself tumbling down this mountain, speeded along by your shotgun."

"There is that." Erin fought off the urge to relax and enjoy his approach. "Look, Mr. Gavin—"

"If," he interrupted conversationally, "you don't start calling me Matt, I'm going to kiss you silly."

She blinked. "Look, Matt—"

"Works every time," he told an invisible third party. "All you have to do is threaten a fate worse than death."

Erin cleared her throat, staving off laughter. "Matt, I really hate to see a busy

man waste time in a—lost cause. And I'd hate to endanger your future progeny by asking you to ride up the mountain every day, which you'd have to do since I rarely go down to town. So—"

"I thought I'd stay here."

It was, she realized, a very matter-of-fact statement and his tone was so reasonable that Erin found herself unable to object—for a split second. "No."

"You have a very comfortable couch," he offered hopefully. "And since I've already spent one night here, your virtuous reputation in town is likely shot to hell anyway. Besides, I've always wanted to spend time in—the back of beyond." He looked around the cozy cabin. "The wilderness stops at your door from the looks of it; you've got all the creature comforts."

"No," she said.

"We can talk about your next book."

"No, Matt," she said firmly.

He looked at her for a moment unreadably. "Well, at least you used my name," he said. "Unprompted, as it were. That's something."

Perversely, she found herself wishing she had not been quite so uncompromising. Still... "Sorry, Matt. I just don't want a guest." Strongly suspecting she'd end in defeat if she allowed the "conversation" to go on any longer, she moved around him toward the back door. "I'll saddle the horse for you."

"Do I have to leave now?"

Erin hardened her heart, which was difficult in the face of his questionable meekness. "Yes. I've been away for two weeks, and I have work to catch up on."

He followed her out to the barn. "Well, thanks for the hospitality, Erin."

His meekness, she thought uneasily, had a motive under it. She couldn't think what it could be, but her knees felt weak again. Dammit. Those gray eyes...

A few moments later she led the sad-

dled horse from the barn and watched while Matt climbed aboard.

"Just tie the reins and turn him loose once I reach town?" he questioned, and when she nodded, nodded himself. "Fine. Thanks again, Erin. Bye."

She watched him ride away, thinking nothing, ignoring a peculiar feeling of depression. When he disappeared from her sight and the peaceful mountain sounds were all to be heard, she shook her head and went into the cabin. Odd that it felt so empty.

Erin kept herself busy for the remainder of the day. She worked outside for the most part, replenishing bird feeders, repairing the fence around her small kitchen garden, and working in the garden itself.

Her horse came home late in the afternoon and Erin fed and watered him and the others, then went into the cabin to feed Chester and herself. She worked for a while that night in the peaceful quiet of her study, getting her notes and research organized for the next book.

It was late when she tidied her desk and quit for the night. She went through her usual getting-ready-for-bed routine, and it was only when she was in bed and drowsy that thoughts of Matt Gavin crept into her mind.

Unwilling to draw comparisons between Matt Gavin and Stuart, she nonetheless found herself doing just that. Would Matt, she wondered, leave a lover in her lonely bed with nothing more than an absent kiss? Would his passion explode with no warning, overpowering but not satisfying? Did a demon drive him to be rough and frantic in love as in life?

No, she thought, Matt would not be a selfish lover as Stuart had been. She was uncomfortable with that knowledge, that certainty, but didn't doubt it. Somehow, she just knew.

Erin turned, pounding her pillow. Too late, she thought, for regrets. Too late to wish she had encouraged his interest. He would have been safe as a lover she thought, because he had his own life in New York and would have returned, leaving her with her peace intact.

There would have been no threat to her heart or her life, just an interlude like a stirring breeze soon gone.

Erin found depression hanging over her head like a gloomy cloud the next morning. The radio squawked as she was passing listlessly to take her coffee out on to the porch, and she detoured to answer, expecting Mal to announce a package for her in town.

He didn't.

"Erin... this dude who went up to see you—"

She felt interest quicken. "What about him, Mal?"

"Well, did you tell him not to come back?"

Erin frowned. "I'm not expecting him, but I didn't threaten him with the shotgun if he came back. Why?"

"He's—uh—a resourceful man, your dude. The whole town's tickled about it."

"About what?"

Mal didn't have to answer, because that was when she heard the music.

Erin signed off the radio and carried her coffee out to the front porch, baffled. Ravel's *Bolero*?

The music swelled steadily. There was another sound accompanying the music; when she identified it, bewilderment clashed with incredulity.

It was a helicopter, and a helicopter with character. It was painted a vile green that shocked the eyes. It was obviously vintage army surplus, a great hulking gunship bare of guns and boasting definitely obscene graffiti painted in various colors. It thundered over the

cabin, blaring Ravel from a loudspeaker bolted near its blunt nose, and set down with a thump drowned by music about twenty yards from the cabin.

While she watched in astonishment, Matt Gavin climbed from the aircraft and strolled toward her with complete sangfroid as the peculiar green machine lifted again with a roar and swooped off.

"Hi," Matt said casually as he reached the porch.

She stared at him, stunned, then sat down on the porch, put her coffee to one side, and laughed herself silly. When she finally got herself under control, she wiped streaming eyes and found Matt sitting beside her, grinning.

"Oh, Lord," she gasped. "Who picked the music?"

Laughter gleamed in his eyes. "Me. Didn't have much choice, I'm afraid. It was either Ravel or some godawful marching music. As you can see—and hear—Steve likes to announce his arrival."

Erin held her aching stomach, smiling at him unconsciously. "The pilot? Where on earth did you find him?"

"He's an old friend of mine. Lives in Denver. He owns a charter service. I called him this morning and asked if he'd mind being my taxi for a while, since I'd met a fascinating woman who lived in an aerie, and I didn't want to end up impaired for life."

Erin choked.

"He said," Matt went on blandly, "he would happily deliver me every morning you cared to have me, then retrieve me before dark."

A little weakly, Erin said, "It'll cost you a fortune—even if it's deductible as transportation costs to find a reclusive writer."

Matt smiled. "Oh, Salem isn't paying. I also called them and announced that I was on vacation."

Erin shut her mouth and tried to think. "But you—I mean—you can't want to—"

"What I'd like to do," he interrupted smoothly, "is find out why one of my favorite writers requested several postponements on her last deadline, and seems to be... unable to tell us anything about her work-in-progress. That's not like you, Erin."

She had to mentally shift gears from the personal to the professional, and felt a bit chagrined about it.

"Have you worked lately?" he asked casually.

"Last night."

"And?"

"And what?" Erin felt defensive and tried to ignore the vague uneasiness that had plagued her for the past three months. Tried to ignore her bitter certainty that the notes and summary she'd compiled weren't any good.

"How did it go?"

"I don't want to talk about it," she said abruptly.

He was silent for a long moment. Then he said, "All right, we'll talk about something else. I need your help. Tell me how to box shadows. Tell me how to fight my way through some other man's stupid mistakes."

She turned her head to stare at him. "I don't know," she said carefully, "what you mean."

"I have a thing about redheads."

Erin blinked.

"I thought this was a professional visit," she managed in a very steady voice.

"I'm on vacation, remember?" Matt was smiling. "Your work is important to me, Erin, but only because it's a part of you. Because you're a *writer*. Not because you make money for my company."

She stared at him, suddenly puzzled by some inflection in his voice. "Your company."

He grinned faintly. "My company. I don't suppose any of us ever notices who signs our checks."

Erin remembered. "My God—you own Salem."

Matt nodded.

"And you expect me to believe you don't care about the earnings from my books?"

"It does sound unlikely, doesn't it? But true, whether you believe it or not. I'll release you from your contract if you like. You can sign with another publisher."

"And?" She looked at him warily.

"And I'll still be on vacation. And I still want to talk to you about your work when you're ready."

"Why? Why would it interest you?"

"If I didn't stand to gain?" His smile was crooked. "Erin, I have all the money I'll ever need. Believe it or not, what matters to me are the writers."

Erin dredged into her memories of what she'd read and heard about Salem. "You took over Salem about ten years ago, didn't you? And a lot of the first crop of books you bought hit the best-seller lists."

"I publish what I like."

It was coming back to her now, what she'd read about her publisher. That he was tough in a tough business, but fiercely supportive of his writers—of all writers. It was, basically, why she had submitted her first book to Salem.

"Writers have it rough in today's market," Matt mused almost to himself. "So many houses want their—products—tailored to whatever happens to be popular at the moment. Writers should be left alone to explore their potential, should be encouraged to write what they feel. Houses should never restrict a writer's vision just because it doesn't match their own—"

Matt broke off abruptly and laughed. "Sorry. Didn't mean to get on my soap-

box."

Erin drew a deep breath. "Lord, don't apologize. What you believe would be music to any writer's ears. You're... an unusual man," she said slowly.

Matt shrugged. "Not really. Even businessmen can be idealistic; it's just that most of them have to think about earning a living and listening to a boss."

She looked at him, realizing that she still was not certain just what interested Matt Gavin here in Colorado: her or her writing. And she was startled when he seemingly picked up on her confusion.

"I want to spend time with you, Erin. Is that so hard to understand?"

"Why—professionally?"

He nodded slightly, his expression clearly saying that she was right to divide his motives into professional and personal. "Professionally... because you're a born writer apparently having trouble writing. And I've had some success in helping writers over walls; I want to help you if I can. Personally..." He hesitated. "I could say it was because you had to fasten those buttons."

"Would that be true?" she asked steadily.

"Partly. But even before that... I was drawn to you. You made me think of a rose bush in full bloom. Very lovely—and potentially painful. Some roses have more thorns than others; you'd better wear gloves when you touch them. That's you."

He sent her a swift smile "If you want me out of your life, Erin, you'll have to use that shotgun. I won't go willingly."

Erin held her voice even. "Matt, I won't—I won't chase you off with a shotgun. But I—don't know you."

He was silent for a moment, then said quietly, "But you'll give us a chance to get to know each other?"

She nodded, not hesitant, but silent. Wondering if the kindest lesson Stuart

had taught her had been to never again throw her entire heart into a relationship, she wouldn't, she decided, do that again.

He rose and drew her to her feet. "That's all I'm asking, Erin. A chance. If I ask questions you don't want to answer, then don't. If I say or do something you don't like, tell me. As long as you'll give us a chance."

Erin could hardly help but think how different this beginning was from the last one. She felt absurdly grateful to Matt for the patience he promised. And he must have seen that.

"I'm breaking new ground?" he asked gently.

Even that mild question almost caused her to withdraw, but then, with a feeling of release, she knew she would answer. "Something like that."

"He swept you off your feet?"

"Like a streamroller." Erin found herself smiling ruefully. "They say every girl hopes a shining Prince Charming will come along on his charger and carry her away; I can tell you it isn't all it's cracked up to be...and falling off a charger hurts like hell."

"Did the prince get tarnished?"

"No, he didn't. He didn't change at all. He had feet of clay, like all princes; I just couldn't see that at first. The shine of him blinded me. He was a handsome, talented prince who could—and did—set the world on fire with his brilliance."

After a moment Matt said, "May I ask—?"

"Stuart Travis." Erin didn't look at Matt, but she could feel his surprised recognition of that name.

"Quite a brilliant prince." His voice was still calm, reflective. "Singer, songwriter, world-famous entertainer. If I remember correctly, he's won more awards than any other singer in history."

"He has. He's only thirty-six." She related the information calmly, with no

envy or bitterness in her tone. "He's been a genius all his life."

"A... driven genius," Matt said quietly.

Erin glanced at him, curiously not surprised by his perception. "Driven by powerful demons, rushing through space and time as if there weren't enough of either. I could never catch my breath."

"Hard to share a genius with the world," Matt commented, a faint question in his voice.

Erin shook her head. "There was never anything to share. Never a part of him that was mine. I was... just there." She looked at Matt suddenly, and her smile twisted. "He loved me."

Matt frowned slightly. "But—?"

Flatly, she explained what had taken her many long and painful months to realize and understand. "But he used me, used what he felt for me. Like everything else in his life. Fodder for his songs."

After a long moment she said, "When Stuart and I met, he wrote a song about us. I was flattered. I always thought that a man singing to a woman was corny—but when you're in love, nothing's corny. That song hit the top ten; millions of people heard it. Shortly after that we had our first fight—and millions of people heard it. During a live concert. In a song."

Matt's brows drew together. "You mean he—"

"Fodder for his songs. The fighting... the making-up. Everything that we were was set to music and sung to the world. He—he wrote songs about our lovemaking. About sleepy eyes in the morning. About a peach nightgown I wore. About—being torn between his wife... and another woman."

She felt the hot sting of tears, but smiled faintly. "I didn't need to stand in his spotlight; he focused it on me. Stripped me naked in front of the world. I ran."

"I wouldn't do that to you, Erin,"

Matt said quietly. "You don't have to run from me."

"Don't I? It would have been so much simpler, Matt, if... If you'd just seen those unfastened buttons. There's no threat in that. That's two people—finding something without having to look too deep. I thought you were safe. Here for a while and then... gone. No threat. But you want—something else. Don't you?"

"Yes," he said steadily.

She paused, "Funny that I know that." She went into the cabin, carrying her coffee cup to the kitchen, knowing he was following.

She spoke before he could. "It was so damned *emotional* with Stuart. Euphoric highs and devastating lows—and no in between. I didn't want to feel like that again. I don't know if I can stand feeling like that again."

"So you just want something non-threatening this time. Something physical. And when it's over—an empty bed, but not an empty heart. Is that it?"

Erin squared her shoulders. "That's it. I'd be sorry if you left, but I won't let you destroy my peace."

"Is it peace? Or a limbo?"

"Whatever it is," she said steadily, not rising to the bait, "I'm happy with it."

Matt crossed his arms over his broad chest and stared at her. "And you don't believe a polite, civilized, impersonal affair will disturb your peace?"

Defiant now, feeling oddly in the wrong, Erin lifted her chin. "No. I don't."

"Okay."

She blinked. "What?"

"I said okay." He glanced around in a businesslike manner. "You have a radio, don't you? The grocer down in town mentioned something about it."

"I—yes, I do." Tensely, she gestured toward the small room containing the radio. "But why do you—"

"I'll get in touch with Steve and have him bring my stuff up from town. I can't stay away from New York indefinitely, so we may as well get on with it, right?" Briskly, he headed for the radio.

Erin paced the living room, her emotions in turmoil. She heard his deep voice in the other room, and when he returned, she whirled to face him with an accusation.

"You said you wouldn't push!"

Matt looked at her in mild surprise. "But that was before I knew you wanted only an affair, Erin. And since we both agree on the ground rules, what's the sense in waiting?"

Erin wanted to agree with him, to say of course he was right, and why should they waste time?

She couldn't say it.

In a tone very different from the brisk one of before, Matt said, "It isn't what you want, is it?"

"Damn you."

Matt smiled. "Erin, you don't want... just an affair."

She looked at him, suddenly curious. "And you don't want one either?"

"No."

"Then what do you want?" she asked in what was very nearly a wail.

He crossed the room to stand before her, looking at her gravely. "Erin, I'd be as blind and deaf as a post if I didn't want to spend the rest of the day in your bed making love with you. And I'm neither blind nor deaf. But the *last* thing I want is to have you believe that another man is using you—for whatever reasons. When we make love, it'll be because we want to, for all the reasons that bring two people together. Not because a physical relationship is easier than an emotional one."

She looked at him for a moment, then caught her breath as he reached out and pulled her firmly into his arms. She couldn't seem to get her breath back, too conscious

was she of the hard-muscled strength of his body pressed against hers.

Matt kissed her with a force and passion that demanded, yet did not take. He parted her lips with fierce need, yet it was not the plundering kiss of a victor; it was not possession but persuasion, fervent and urgent.

Erin, suddenly dizzy, felt the force of that kiss. She felt the persuasion that was insidiously heating her blood and draining the strength from her legs. She knew that she was being, for the second time in her life, swept off her feet. An abrupt surging anger rose in her. She would not—*would not*—be carried away by someone else.

"Damn you!" she gasped. "I *won't* be rushed again! Stable your damned charger and slow down!"

She pushed vainly against his broad chest. Matt laughed, infuriating man that he was.

"And you thought we could have a simple little affair," he pointed out dryly. He shook his head in gentle disbelief, still easily resisting her attempts to escape.

Erin stopped struggling and glared up at him. "You listen to me! I'll take control of my own life, dammit! I'll never again be carried along by someone else like some starry-eyed idiot! I'll *take* this time, I'll *demand* what's mine and won't wait to have it handed to me on a plate like a reward for being a good girl!"

"Good."

The soft, delighted words stopped her. Matt *wanted* her to fight for herself, for her rights as a woman.

Matt grinned at her. "You fight me every inch of the way, wildcat. Yell at me—hit me if you want. Because the passion in you is worth whatever it takes to free itself."

In something like horror, Erin realized then that she had just announced to both of them that, no matter how strongly she wanted no complications in her life, a deci-

sion had been made.

"Oh, no," she said numbly. "Not—"

"Don't say *again*," he interrupted instantly. "It wasn't like this before, Erin. What just exploded between us is something I'll bet Stuart Travis would have sold his soul for—if only to write about it. But he never felt what I just felt from you. I don't know why. Maybe you were so overpowered by him. Maybe it just wasn't in you then.

"But the point is that it's in you *now*. And I *want* it, Erin! I want that passion. If I have to needle you until you strike out at me, kiss you until you fight me, force you to feel it in spite of yourself—I'll get it."

She stepped back, and this time he allowed it. She felt curiously energized. She felt as if something long trapped and hidden inside her had burst suddenly into life. "And what," she asked evenly, "am I supposed to get from this?"

"Anything you can take. You want my heart? Take it. Fight for it."

Staring at him, she said slowly, "I let Stuart use me. I didn't lift a finger to stop him."

Matt nodded. "Now you see it. And now you've got the chance to see if that would happen again. I know it wouldn't; I know that I'd never do that to you, and that you'd never allow it to happen. But you aren't sure of that. So we'll fight it out until you are sure."

"Will we fight—in there?" she asked, nodding toward the bedroom, feeling, with a sense of surprise, no embarrassment at the blunt question.

"We'll fight to get there." He nodded, seeing the comprehension on her face. "It'd be too easy to start there, wouldn't it? But we will get there—eventually. In the meantime," he grinned. "I suggest we suspend hostilities in favor of lunch."

Erin started, surprised to realize that it was only just past noon. And then she remembered something else. "Didn't you

get in touch with Steve?"

Matt grinned at her. "Sure I did. I told him to come pick me up around five this afternoon."

She glared at him. "Swine. You knew I wouldn't—"

"Well, I was reasonably sure you wouldn't. Lunch?" he added hopefully.

"I ought to let you starve." Erin went into the kitchen and started banging pots, taking a perverse pleasure in the noise. But Matt merely remarked that his sisters always made a hell of a racket in the kitchen when they were irritated and that it sounded like home to him.

"How many sisters?" Erin asked ruefully.

"Four. Three older, one younger. My father died when I was young, so my mother and sisters raised me." He grinned as she sent a discerning glance his way. "I won't say I always enjoyed my upbringing, but it did teach me quite a lot about the feminine mind."

Erin turned her back on his grin, uneasily aware of its charm. Damn the man.

Thinking back on the day as she lay alone in bed late that night, Erin decided that she had managed to hold her own. She was still somewhat bewildered by the flare of emotions between her and Matt, but admitted—to herself—a certain excitement in what was clearly going to be a furious exploration of those emotions.

Matt's charger woke her at the crack of dawn the next morning with its vibrating roar and fanfare of *Bolero*.

Climbing from her bed, she swore steadily and stumbled through the house to wrench open the front door.

Chester, taking an interest today in the music, lifted his muzzle and howled mournfully behind her.

"Good morning!" Matt shouted as he reached the steps, eyeing her in obvious

enjoyment.

Looking down at herself, Erin realized that she was wearing a T-shirt that barely covered the tops of her thighs—with nothing underneath it. Refusing to be embarrassed, she looked him fiercely in the eye. "Gentlemen," she told him, "don't come calling at dawn!"

"I'm not a gentleman, I'm a general. And an army marches on its stomach. How about breakfast?" Stepping onto the porch, he continued to gaze at her appreciatively. "Tell you what—I'll cook. You can just stand around looking seductive in that outfit." Then he added in a different tone, "For godsake go get dressed before I carry you and the battle into the bedroom."

The fact that she obeyed this command, Erin decided moments later as she dressed, had nothing to do with docility. It was, she acknowledged ruefully, more along the lines of discretion being the better part of valor.

Pausing before leaving her bedroom, Erin studied herself in the mirror. Her jeans were tight, molding hips and legs lovingly. Her sweater boasted a V neckline and was a soft coral that added an extra gleam to her hair and eyes. Girded for battle, Erin strolled out of her bedroom.

After breakfast, Erin cleaned up and they carried their coffee out to the porch. Matt looked at Erin, which was a mistake. The morning sun made her hair gleam like copper. He shifted his gaze out over the mountain and waved a hand at the lonely grandeur surrounding them. "You know, this is a fine place to come to, but a bad place to *run* to. And three years is too damn long to hide up here."

"I'm not hiding!"

"No?" Matt slid his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels. "Prove it."

"How?"

"Spend the day with me tomorrow in Denver. Steve will fly us." He paused, adding blandly, "And see a concert tomorrow night."

Erin, on the point of accepting the dare, hesitated and felt suspicious. "Concert?"

"Uh-huh." Matt related a piece of information he'd discovered the day before. "Stuart Travis."

"You—swine!" Erin said when she could.

Satisfied with the reaction that was anger rather than fear or pain, Matt nodded firmly. "I'll box shadows, Erin. I'll even punch out flesh and flood. But I want to be sure of what I'm fighting. And I want you to take a good long look at what you're hiding from."

"Let me think about it," she said softly. She stared into her coffee cup for a moment, then set it aside and looked at him. "But I'm not hiding."

Matt was silent.

"All right—I was hiding when I came. But not now. Not for a long time now."

"As long as you know that."

She saluted him with an inclination of her head. "All right, General—that's one point for your side. What do we fight about next?"

"Are you writing?"

She stirred, uneasy. "No. I don't feel like working."

"Maybe," he suggested neutrally, "you're ready for a change in your life. Less—peace and quiet?"

Erin frowned a little. "I just don't feel like writing. I need a break, that's all."

"All right," he responded easily. "Why don't we pack a picnic lunch and go find a spectacular view?"

Erin decided not to argue. She merely agreed and went inside the cabin with him.

blanket up the mountain, at last reaching Erin's favorite place. The trail ended abruptly at the edge of the cliff, a spectacular view framed by the deep green of pine trees. They spread the blanket on a layer of pine needles, ate their lunch and then just enjoyed the view in companionable silence.

After a long while Matt said, "Did your relationship with Stuart really hurt so badly?"

Erin, lying only a few safe feet from the cliff edge, nodded slowly without looking at him. "It did then. Oh, not the other woman. Oddly enough, that barely hurt at all. But the rest of it. The feeling my life was no longer mine. The understanding that . . . that Stuart had taken what I was, what we were, and turned us into songs people sung with their radios. It cheapened me, what I felt. Or thought I felt. Maybe another woman could have coped. I couldn't." Her sigh was a soft rush of sound. "I was in the studio when he recorded the song about his new love. He looked at me while he sang. Oh, he didn't mean to be cruel. He was just explaining the only way he knew how. He looked surprised when I walked out." She looked at Matt.

"A few months after the divorce, I was in town and heard his latest song on the radio," she went on. "It was about the death of love—and a marriage. The music industry gave him three awards for it."

Matt sat with his back against a tree and gazed at her, then quickly he lay down beside her, raised on an elbow to look down at her. "He couldn't touch the passion in you," Matt said softly. "He couldn't destroy that. He killed a girl's dream, Erin . . . not a woman's love."

She stared up at him. "*You want my heart? Fight for it.*" With a shock she could feel all through her body, Erin realized then that she did want his heart.

She was reaching up even as he leaned

Later they carried a picnic basket and

toward her, seeing in his flaring eyes the reflection of her own, seeing a face transformed by a sudden and terrible need. A slumbering fire ignited instantly when his lips captured hers... or hers took him captive.

Erin felt the seeking demand of warm, hard lips, the primitive possession of his breath moving hotly from his mouth to hers. Again and again he kissed her, deep, drugging kisses that sapped her strength and her soul. But the force of her, the elemental power so recently freed, she willingly gave him, her response as fiery, as strong and hungry as his own desire.

Matt could barely breathe, feeling his heart pounding like a runaway engine in his chest. Her every touch made him that much more hungry, that much more desperate for her. He wanted her so much that nothing else mattered.

He loved her. And along with that knowledge came the certainty that loving her as he did, he could not make love to her. Not with so much still unresolved. They couldn't take the easy way.

With a wrenched groan he rolled away from her. Instinct made him reach out swiftly with his free hand, catching hers and holding it hard to ease the uncomprehending pain of rejection.

Erin lay in silence for a long tense moment, staring upward at the canopy of green pines and feeling bereft. Then she felt the slight pain of his tight grip, and that other pain lessened. She turned finally on her side to face him, holding his hand as tightly as he held hers.

The tautness in his face both reassured her—and awed her. What was this growing between them? Was this love? If it was—if it was, she thought, then she had never loved.

Matt spoke at last. "You have to face him, tomorrow, put him behind you. Then we go on."

Erin thought about that for a moment,

understanding the need for certainty, for resolution. That other prince was gone, but there had been a man as well, and he was still a shadowy, elusive part of her. She had to see that man without the shining armor she had encased him in.

"All right," she said, hardly recognizing the soft, husky sound of her own voice.

The fiery passion he had aroused in her was banked now, and with clear thought came wariness. She had been at the mercy of her feelings once before, and even though every beat of her heart told her this was different, this was real, she was nonetheless frightened.

And Matt knew.

He caught her hand firmly as they walked back down the trail to the cabin later. "Tell me what you're thinking, Erin."

She responded slowly. "Back there... I was swept away. But now... I don't know... I can't be sure that I feel what I think I feel... I mean—it's happened so damn *fast*!"

Self-doubt and uncertainty crowded into her mind. Could she trust herself not to make the same mistakes again? In the blaze of passion between her and Matt, could she find enough strength to keep control of her life?

"You think too much," Matt said suddenly.

"Oh, no! Before, I—" She broke off.

Matt seemed unperturbed by the intended comparison. "You didn't think enough? Probably not. He didn't give you time to think. And now you're worrying about everything. Well, we both knew we wouldn't take the easy way."

As they came out of the trees and faced the cabin, he stopped and looked down at her.

"All I know is that what I want and need from you isn't simple physical passion. And for you to give me what I need

requires a trust we don't have yet."

"What do you need?" she asked softly.

"Your love," he answered simply. "I don't want the blind worship of a girl for a prince. I want the love of a woman for a man. I want you to trust me because you see me clearly—in all my human imperfection."

"I'm human, too," she said shakily, then swallowed hard. "And imperfect, Lord knows. It's just—you don't know it all, Matt. It's hard to trust myself not to let it happen again." Blindly, she pulled free of his gentle grasp, ran into the cabin and flung herself onto the couch. Soon she felt his weight beside her.

"Erin—"

Quickly, softly, aching with a pain that had never entirely left her, she said, "Matt... it wasn't the end of a marriage or the death of—a dream that caused me to run up here and hide. Those were... final blows, but they broke me only because any blow would have broken me then."

"Something else happened," he said slowly.

Erin nodded blindly, feeling suddenly the grief that had lain deeply buried for more than three years.

"Tell me," Matt urged quietly.

"I'd never lost anyone before." She was talking more to herself than to him, reliving the shock and pain. "But I lost him. He moved inside me for months and then... I just lost him. If I could have held on to him for one more month, they could have saved him..."

The hand on her shoulder tightened suddenly, convulsively, and Matt's deep voice was unsteady with anguish. "You lost a baby? Oh, Erin—I'm sorry!"

Her eyes filled with hot tears that spilled free to run down her cheeks. His had been an instant and honest expression of sympathy for a devastating loss. Such simple words. But Stuart hadn't been able

to say them. To him it had meant only a minor inconvenience, a bad dress rehearsal before the real performance.

"Don't look so stricken, honey. We'll have another kid. The doc says they're letting you out of here in a few days, so you can meet me in Detroit. I have to catch the jet this afternoon. You need anything before I go? No? See you in Detroit then, baby."

Erin felt strong arms drawing her close, and she hid her face against Matt's warm throat.

"He didn't care! He never even said he was sorry. And he'd acted excited about the baby." She laughed, and it was a terrible sound. "A baby was something new, you see. He'd never been a father before. He wanted to—experience it. He was even going to take childbirth instructions, because he wanted to be there. But then I miscarried. And he—he didn't even say he was sorry. The baby wasn't real to him."

And then she cried.

Matt held her tightly, making no attempt to halt her rasping sobs, and wondered savagely what kind of bastard could feel no pain at the death of his child.

After awhile Erin lay limp in his arms, drained but curiously at peace. She had finally let go. She accepted the handkerchief he gave her, wiping her cheeks.

"I got your shirt all wet," she murmured.

"It'll dry." Matt rubbed his cheek against her forehead, his voice very gentle.

She realized distantly that Matt could hold her without desire exploding between them, that he could be tender and evoke tenderness, and she pondered that silently. She felt so... at home in his arms. Beneath the hand clutching a handkerchief, she could feel his heart beating steadily as she fell asleep.

Matt continued to hold her, to softly stroke the silky fire of her hair. He smiled

a little, realizing that she'd probably be disgruntled to wake finding herself clinging like a limpet. He was under no illusions; though her painful disclosure had brought them closer than ever before, it had been a temporary closeness.

Matt rested his chin atop her head and thought about that. He had, he knew honestly, been drawn by her beauty, but it was the personality behind her beauty that had kept him stubbornly in her life. And, of course, there had been his physical reaction to her.

He immediately regretted even the thought. The ache of desire that had not entirely deserted him for some time now began throbbing again as he held Erin.

At a loss for what to do, he began reciting verses in a soft and toneless voice. Not that it helped.

Erin thought she was dreaming. A rumbling had disturbed her, finally becoming definite sounds with a kind of rhythm. She listened, frowning a little.

But four young oysters hurried up, all eager for the treat: their coats were brushed, their faces washed, Their shoes were clean and neat—And this was odd, because, you know, they hadn't any feet.

Erin sat bolt upright and stared at Matt incredulously. "Why on earth were you reciting Lewis Carroll?"

He looked at her for a moment, then sighed. "Because, my darling Erin, it was either recite nonsense verses or else attack you with a howl. I thought the verses would be less likely to earn me a slap."

She blinked. Unaware that she was reacting exactly as Matt had decided she would, she moved abruptly to put nearly a foot of space between them, feeling a bit uneasy over her nap in his arms.

"Matt, stop pretending you can't keep your hands off me!" she said defensively.

"Pretending?"

"You're a grown man, for godsake!"

"I keep telling myself that." Matt looked pained. "It's pretty unnerving to find at this late stage in my life that I have so little control over my own body."

She hesitated, then said almost inaudibly, "We can still take the easy way."

"No. When you can wake up in my arms and not pull away—then it'll be time for the easy way. And the easy way will be the right way."

Her throat felt tight in the most ridiculous way, and she fought to ignore it. Inexplicably cross, she muttered. "I'm not likely to wake up in your arms again unless we *do* take the easy way!"

"There is that. I'll have to arrange something." He was looking at her with a curiously twisted smile. "I," he said, "am certifiably out of my mind."

She stood with her hands on her hips and stared at him. "Yes," she said finally. "Yes, I think you are."

"Meaning?"

"I mean... you're crazy because you've put both of us on an emotional roller coaster. Neither of us—apparently—can think straight when we—when we touch each other." She took a deep breath. "Nothing matters then, nothing seems impossible. But then we aren't touching, and—and it doesn't seem real."

He rose to his feet, frowning. "Erin—"

"You seem real," she hurried on. "And when I look at you, I know—I know there's... something between us. Something real. It's *me*, Matt. It's what I feel that I don't trust, don't believe in."

"Give it time," he urged quietly.

"I... don't think we have much time." *Before we lose control*, she added silently. "Matt... I have to think this time. I *have* to. I won't be swept away again. And I think—I think I can write now. I think I need to."

"Are you telling me to get lost?" His voice was still quiet, but a little strained

now.

"I'm... asking. How long will Stuart be in Denver? Do you know?"

"He's giving three concerts, the last one a week from tonight. Apparently, the demand for his concerts took three scheduled performances to satisfy."

After a moment she said, "Then give me a week, Matt. A week to be alone, to write, to think."

"Are you afraid of facing him?"

"No." She turned then, leaning back against the doorjamb. "No, I'm not afraid. Instead of tomorrow night, we—I'll—face him in a week."

"We," Matt said flatly. "We'll face him. If you want me to leave, Erin, then I will. I'll go back home. But I'll be with you in Denver next week, at that concert." He studied her, his eyes restless, then sighed. "I'll call Steve and have him come pick me up."

She stared after him for a long moment, hearing his deep voice in the radio room. Then she went out and sat on the steps, asking herself if she was doing the right thing. She thought she was. She felt his presence even before he sat down beside her, and spoke without thinking. "I should have met you first."

"But you didn't. You met him. And you were looking for a prince."

"Was I? If so, it was stupid of me. Fairy tales. I reached for glitter... and that's what I got. Just something shiny and empty." Staring blindly she said, "There's nothing *there* anymore, Matt. Just a year gone from my life. Why can't I forget it? Why can't I put it behind me?"

"Because you married a man and lost a dream... and a child." After a moment, and with obvious reluctance, he went on quietly. "There is something there, Erin. Something you haven't resolved, him. To you, he was always larger than life. He wrecked your dreams, but he never quite forced you to let go of them, not all of

them. There's still something in you that blames yourself instead of him. That's what you can't let go of."

Against her will, listening to his low, relentless voice, Erin realized he was right.

"It takes two to make a marriage," she whispered. "And two to destroy it."

They both heard the sound of a helicopter approaching, and Matt rose to his feet. Catching her hands, he pulled her up as well. Quickly, he said, "Sometimes it only takes one. Erin... he'll try to get you back."

She looked up at him, bewildered. "No. Not Stuart."

"Yes," Matt insisted. "He's shallow and he's a fool, but he'll see the change in you. It'll gall him, Erin. He'll hate the fact that another man found something in you that he missed, something he never touched." Matt glanced up, impatient, as the roar of Steve's helicopter grew louder.

"Matt, you're wrong! He doesn't care—"

"Just listen to me. I know what I'm saying, Erin! God knows I don't want to do anything to send you back to him—but you have to know. You could handle him now. You could have him on his *knees*! You're a hell of a lot stronger than he is. Remember that."

Then, after a hard, possessive kiss, Matt was gone.



In the three years since she had lived on the mountain, Erin had never felt loneliness. After the frenetic pace of her marriage, she had been more than ready to be alone with Chester, but now, as the days passed, she felt lonely.

She leaned heavily on her writing, working long hours and skipping meals and sleep. She felt a rueful gratitude that Matt, in throwing her emotions into chaos, had somehow forced her to break through her "story block" and begin writing again.

On Wednesday morning Erin woke to a thumping roar, and she recognized the sound of *Bolero* and the arrival of a helicopter. She threw back the covers and hurried to the front door, her heart thudding, hoping that Matt had returned in spite of her week limit. But when she yanked open the door, it was to see the helicopter lifting off and swooping away. It was then, backing away a step and beginning to close the door, that Erin looked down to see the roses, six perfect red roses wrapped in tissue, and atop them lay an envelope.

Erin carried the roses into the cabin, feeling unexpectedly teary. She opened the envelope carefully, and unfolded a short message.

Six days without you are hard to bear. I hope you're missing me. A favor? I've asked Steve to come and pick you up early Thursday morning; please stay with him and his wife in Denver until I arrive. They want to meet you, and have invited you to stay as long as you like. Bring Chester. Please, Erin, do this for me.

There was never a week so long.

Matt

She was ready early the next morning, bag packed and by the door. Chester howled when Ravel approached, but stopped suddenly as the music and engine did. Holding the leash firmly since her pet was not above making a dash for freedom, Erin opened the door to look curiously at the approaching pilot.

He was a lean six-footer, dark-haired, with cheerful brown eyes. "Steve Burke," he said, holding out his hand.

Erin shook hands, smiling. "Erin Scott. It's nice to finally meet you after hearing you come and go so many times."

He grinned and glanced at her bag. "Good—then you are coming."

"Did you doubt it?" she asked curious-

ly.

"Well, Matt didn't," he said, then immediately grimaced. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

She was laughing. "Yes, I know. He wasn't arrogant about it. He just knew I'd come. Damn him."

Reassured by this reaction, Steve smiled again. "Ally's really looking forward to it. My wife—Alison." Steve carried Erin's bag to the helicopter, then returned to help her muscle the reluctant dog into his place behind the seats. Within moments the helicopter lifted away, the sounds of Chester's unhappiness drowned by rotors.

Making use of the intercom, Steve explained that he and his wife had a house in the suburbs of Denver, had two children—Danny and Julie, eight and six respectively—and cheerfully dismissed Erin's fears that having her stay with them would be an imposition.

"How long have you known Matt?" she asked.

"Twenty years. We met in high school. Went to the same college. Same branch of the service, too."

"Service?"

"Air Force. We were both pilots." He sent her a grin. "We learned as teenagers, because Matt's mother is a pilot."

Erin listened, fascinated. "Is she?"

"Her name's Penelope, Penny to everyone who knows her—and she's a dynamite pilot."

Erin felt her eyes widening, "Does she still—?"

"Oh, yes. Penny's forever young. She's in her late fifties, of course, but she married young. The twins were born when she was just nineteen."

"Twins?"

"He didn't tell you? Well, Matt doesn't talk about family much. His oldest sisters are twins, Adrian and Barbara. After them came Kathy, then Matt, then Ally."

Erin debated briefly, but she knew that her mind had been made up even before her call to Stuart's manager. She had to see Stuart alone, without Matt to cling to. Matt, she thought ruefully, would not be happy about it. But he would, she knew, understand.

Casually, Erin told her hosts after dinner that she was going into Denver for a while, and was instantly urged to take one of the family cars. Gratefully accepting, she left soon after dinner, armed with a map.

She had no trouble finding Stuart's small hotel, and went inside with the casual air of belonging. She went directly to the elevators, up to Stuart's floor, and found herself knocking on his door—only then wondering if she would be interrupting the current romance.

Stuart opened the door to stare at her in surprise.

"Hello, Stuart. Mind if I come in?"

"Of course not." He stepped back, gesturing, and Erin entered his suite; it was empty of people but for them.

Erin crossed to the center of the sitting room before turning to face him, feeling a faint, thoughtful surprise. How odd, she mused; he was only as tall as she was herself. She could have sworn he was taller.

"What're you doing in Denver?" Stuart asked.

"Visiting friends."

"Does that include me?"

"No." She smiled a little. "We were never friends."

"We were lovers," he said with surprising truculence. "We were married."

Erin studied him in silence. He was lean with the wired tautness of explosive energy, dark and brooding of face, undeniably, strikingly handsome. But . . . a little surprised, Erin saw a man instead

of a prince.

She went to a chair and sat down, feeling unthreatened and unafraid. "Con said you wanted to see me. Any particular reason?"

His brows drew together as he stood staring at her. Indecision and uncertainty flickered in his eyes, then anger. The anger of a man accustomed to holding the complete attention of whomever he spoke to. "I want you back." He stepped toward her, eyes lighting.

"No." She shook her head, stopping him in midstride. "I'm sorry, Stuart. I have a new life now, one I'm quite happy with." She thought of Matt, and her lips curved unconsciously.

Stuart went very still, something hot and angry leaping out of his eyes. "And another man?"

Erin looked at him. "Did you think," she said dryly, "I'd waste away for wanting you? I left you. And that's where it ended, Stuart."

"I'll change your mind," he insisted.

It took only a moment for Erin to realize what he was doing. Stuart was surely playing a role, the role of a lover betrayed, a lover desperate to reclaim his lost love no matter what the cost to his pride.

He probably believed it himself, she thought. And it was an ordeal for him. He would tear himself to shreds—for a while. Then he would set the emotions to music and blast them into an audience of millions.

For the first time, she understood what his genius cost him. His own demon drove him to experience—however briefly—all the extremes of emotion; and his life was a series of roles designed for just that effect.

"I'm sorry, Stuart," she said, rising. "Once we might have tried again. But it's too late now. You belong to the world. There was never a part of you that was

Abruptly, Steve winced and sent her an uneasy look.

Erin hadn't missed it. "Ally. Alison? Your wife?"

He sighed. "Well, she would have told you once we got home. It's just that Matt said you wouldn't come if you knew."

Erin would have responded, but the helicopter began descending then, and she took the time to gather her composure. It had been no part of her plans to meet any of Matt's family, particularly now, when she was still uncertain about her relationship with him.

In the sprawling two-story house that was comfortably cluttered, Alison Burke greeted Erin. Her blue eyes were bright as she studied her with friendly curiosity.

Seeing hesitation as they shook hands, Erin put the older woman at ease. "Steve let the cat out of the bag," she said dryly. "And I just may kill your brother when he gets here."

Ally laughed. "I'm just glad to meet you, however Matt got you here."

The day was enjoyable for Erin. The Burke family accepted her easily, and she learned all about Matt's sisters and their families. And about Matt.

He called late that afternoon, talking briefly to his sister before asking for Erin, "I miss you," he told her, his voice husky.

Erin ignored her weakening knees and kept her voice calm. "Do you? I got some writing done this week."

"Good. You aren't mad at me, are you? For not telling you who Ally and Steve were?"

"Do I sound mad?"

"You sound like a prickly rose bush." He paused. "I'll be back tomorrow afternoon, Erin. And I've gotten our seats for the concert." It was a question.

Steadily, Erin answered it. "All right."

"And then we go on. Erin . . . remember

what I told you. You're stronger now. Stronger than he is."

"All right," she repeated.

"I'll see you tomorrow, then."

"Yes. Good-bye, Matt."

She stood for a moment, staring down at the telephone. Then, taking a deep breath, she picked up the receiver again and made a collect call to California.

"Hello, Con, how are you?"

"Fine, just fine, Erin. And you?" Conrad Styles, Stuart's manager, hid his surprise.

She more or less passed over his question. "Con, I'm in Denver, and I'd like to see Stuart. Can you tell me where he's staying, please?" Experience told her that Stuart's whereabouts would be a closely guarded secret.

After a slight hesitation Con said slowly. "Stuart wanted to get in touch with you, but your lawyer wouldn't give out your address."

"Do you know what he wanted?" Erin asked warily.

"He didn't say." He hesitated, then said, "Lisa didn't last out the divorce proceedings. Did you know?"

"No." But Erin wasn't surprised. Lisa was the "other woman" Stuart had written about. Dryly, she added, "No reconciliation, Con. I just want to talk to Stuart. Will you tell me where he's staying?"

Con gave her the hotel and room number. Then to Erin's surprise, he added, "Stuart's a fantastic talent, Erin, but he'll always be a taker. Don't let him take anything else from you, huh? I didn't like what he did to you before."

Erin was touched. "Thanks for caring, Con. But I've made a new life for myself—and there's someone else now. Stuart won't hurt me again."

"I hope not," Con said soberly. "Take care, Erin."

"I will. Good-bye, Con."

mine. I need a man who can give himself to me. A man who needs me.”

“I need you!” His face was drawn, pale.

“You need your music.” She moved toward the door.

Stuart reached out suddenly, blind obsession in his eyes. He caught her before she could escape, kissing her with bruising passion.

Erin stood unmoved, not struggling, no flicker of response rising in her. When he finally lifted his head and gazed with clouded eyes into her own distant face, his mouth turned bitterly. “I killed it, didn’t I?” he asked huskily. “I killed it three years ago.”

Erin looked at him mutely.

Stuart released her. “You woke up, grew up, because of another man.”

Her instant surprise quickly faded. Of course he saw a change in her—just as Matt had predicted.

“We’ll be at your concert tomorrow night,” she said slowly, unsure why she was telling him.

“He wants a look at his competition?” Stuart laughed harshly before she could respond. “I always thought you had fire buried somewhere and, damn you, I could never find it.”

She blinked, again surprised, but Stuart was instantly back in his role. “I won’t give up, Erin. I’ll win you back.”

Erin gathered her thoughts and played her part. “No, Stuart. It’s too late. I won’t be seeing you again after tomorrow. There wouldn’t be any use.”

He watched, grim and unsmiling, as she headed for the door. When she turned for a last look, his eyes were bright . . . and she could almost hear the music. She left, closing the door behind her and stood in the hall until she heard what she had expected to hear—the sounds of tentative chords being struck on a guitar.

It was late when Erin got back and let

herself into the Burkes’ darkened house with the key they had given her. A small lamp stood on the hall table, providing a warm, dim glow. When Matt spoke, she turned toward the den to find his face in shadow, his body taut.

“You went to see him. You had to see him alone,” he said.

Erin nodded, hearing both his understanding of that and his dislike of it. “It was important, Matt. It had to be just him and me.”

“And?” He looked at her, eyes restless.

Erin followed Matt into the den and sat down next to him on the couch. She told him exactly what had happened. She told all the things she had realized and understood.

“I can almost feel sorry for him,” Matt said.

“I do.” She smiled a little. “But that’s all I feel. I don’t love him or hate him or feel bitter toward him.”

“Then that year isn’t standing between us anymore?”

“No.”

“But . . . you still have to hear him sing. It was his singing, wasn’t it, that first drew you?”

Erin no longer felt surprise at Matt’s perception. She nodded. “He’s larger than life onstage. It was easy to look at him and see a prince. But it won’t make a difference now, Matt.”

“Still.” He sighed. “Until you’re absolutely sure. . . .”

“I can’t sleep in your arms?” There was a note of teasing in her voice. “It would serve you right,” she grinned, “if I jumped onstage as soon as Stuart sang the first note tomorrow night, and fell into his arms.”

There were, Matt thought, things beyond bearing. He lunged. Laughing. Erin found herself lying back on the couch with her arms happily up around

Matt's neck.

"We have to see if I can wake in your arms and not pull away," she said. "You also told me I had to fight for what I wanted," she reminded him throatily, tilting her head back as he began exploring the V neckline of her blouse. His rueful laugh tickled her flesh and made her shiver.

Erin waited until he lifted his head. She gazed gravely into his eyes. "You've been giving, Matt, and getting nothing. Let me give."

"What do you want to give?" he asked very quietly.

"What do you most want from me?"

Matt hesitated, then sighed. "Your love."

"That's what I want to give you. I love you, Matt. I've known it for a long time. I was just afraid to believe it. Afraid I'd created another prince, afraid you'd go away when I touched you."

"And you aren't...afraid of that anymore?" His voice was unsteady.

"I'm not afraid."

Matt drew a deep breath. "God, Erin, I love you! I've been going out of my mind all week, afraid you'd decide you didn't want me. And when I called this afternoon—you sounded so distant. After I hung up, it was like a kick in the stomach to realize that I'd asked you to come here—so damned close to Travis and to that year you spent with him. I had to get here as fast as I could."

Matt kissed her, his lips warm and hard, and Erin instantly took fire, fighting the reins he held on his desire. Even though a part of her mind reminded her of just where they were, she didn't listen.

He tore his lips from hers at last.

"I'm not going up to that empty bed. I think we'll find out, after all, if you can wake in my arms and not pull away."

"I won't pull away." Erin snuggled

even closer, finding that her body fit his as if some fate had decreed it. She knew with glorious certainty that she had found her match, her mate.

Exhausted both from physical tension and emotional strain, they both slept deeply.

Matt woke slowly, instantly aware of her warmth at his side. He found himself listening instinctively for the even sound of her breathing. He knew that the day, with all its distractions and potential problems, was here. Would she pull away? He was afraid to put it to the test.

"Good morning," she murmured and raised up on her elbow to smile down at him. "We better get up before they find us here." She was so beautiful it stopped his heart and she didn't draw away.



They left just before lunch, Matt telling his sister and brother-in-law that they'd be late in returning. They explored the city—walking, window shopping, talking casually. They had lunch in a small restaurant, and the casual talk dropped away from them. Every meeting of eyes grew more intense until at last Matt said, "Erin... could you move to New York?"

"As long as you're there," she answered simply.

He drew a sharp breath. "What about your cabin?"

She smiled. "It'll always be there. For vacations. Visits from time to time."

"There are demands on me," he warned reluctantly. "Sometimes—late nights. Trips I have to take."

"I'll cope, Matt. If you want me with you, I'll be there. You won't ask more of me than I'll be able to give."

"Just—tell me if I do. I won't mind so much to know you're waiting, but if you feel stifled and leave—"

She looked at him, realizing suddenly that Matt was so apprehensive of asking too much of her that he was unwilling to

ask for a binding commitment.

Erin reached across the table to lay her hand over his. "Marry me," she said softly.

Something leaped in his eyes. "If you ever felt trapped," he said roughly, "or had to break your vows, I don't think I could stand it. I *know* that what I feel for you is forever, but—"

She smiled gently. "But I may not be sure? I love you, Matt. And what I feel is forever. Marry me."

He carried her hand to his lips, his eyes very bright. "Just say when," he murmured.

Erin laughed aloud. "When!"

The lights dimmed and thousands of voices fell to silence. The curtain swept back, revealing instruments, cables tangled from amplifiers to instruments, musicians . . . and a lone man in the center of the stage.

The crowd went wild.

Matt realized instantly what Erin had meant by calling Stuart Travis larger than life. His charm was palpable as he talked and joked with the audience, his voice warm and deep. And then he sang.

He came to the edge of the stage, unerringly finding the warm glow of Erin's hair in the third row. They were close enough to see him clearly, and it was obvious that he saw them but he gazed only at Erin, sang only to her.

It didn't take Matt more than the length of one song to realize that Travis was still trying to win his ex-wife back. The first song was about a man falling in love with a woman with hair the color of a sunset. The second song was about a wedding. The third, about a fight—and making up afterward. The fourth, about a peach nightgown and a lovely sleeping face.

It was a strange, stomach-jarring shock for Matt to realize what was happening. He heard the man singing with passion

and power and longing, heard a man making love to Erin with music.

The singer sang, on and on. She hadn't exaggerated, Matt thought. Every facet of their life together had been set to music, even the loss of a baby. Matt tightened his hold on her hand as he heard the song about the baby, appalled that the man could have been so callous—and so hypocritical. To Erin he had shown no regret, no grief; to the world he could show both.

He glanced at her profile quickly, seeing only a calm and detached interest, and some of his own tension drained away. That was when he felt her squeeze his hand gently, and he realized that she was very aware of his reaction to all this.

Finally, as the crowd was wildly applauding a song about the painful end of a marriage, Travis smiled a curious twisted smile. He looked directly at Matt for the first time. Then he saluted the other man in a gesture that seemed to mock both of them, and sang a last song, a song about an ex-wife's unexpected visit and a final ending. There was, it seemed, another man—a man who knew how to summon fire, and hold it, a man who had found a woman's love.

Then the stage went abruptly dark, the last echoes of the song ringing out in the blackness of despair.

The crowd went crazy, and was still wildly applauding when the houselights came up. There was no curtain call. As the rest of the crowd began to rise, Matt did also. Erin stood at his side, her hand still within his grasp, and said nothing.

Matt nerved himself and looked at her.

She was smiling. "He's very talented. I'd forgotten. And that last bit, killing the lights like that, was very effective, don't you think?"

Matt drew a deep breath. "Very effective. The hair on the back of my neck stood up."

She laughed. "Another award winner, that song."

The crowd was moving, surging toward exists, and they had no choice but to move along with the tide. There was no time and no privacy to say what needed to be said, so they were silent. It took nearly half an hour to get out of the building and find their car in the lot.

As they sat in the car, Matt made no effort to join the rush to leave. He spoke quietly, "I knew he was talented... but not like that. I listened to him and—I told myself he wouldn't get you back. I told myself you knew him too well now to be fooled by his songs. But I was so afraid he'd win."

Utterly calm, Erin said, "There was never a chance of that. I knew what he was trying to do. And I didn't feel a thing. Oh, I admired his talent, but that was all."

"You're... sure?" he asked softly.

"Completely sure." She turned, sliding her arms around his neck, smiling. "I love you, Matt."

Matt drew her even closer and kissed her. "I love you," he whispered when he could, drinking in the glow of her green eyes, the tender smile.

"I've nothing at all against your sister and brother-in-law," Erin murmured, "but do we have to go back to their house?" With direct and husky honesty, she added, "I don't want to wait anymore, Matt."

Matt felt as nervous as a sixteen-year-old.

He hung up the phone after offering a somewhat incoherent explanation to Ally, then sat and counted to ten silently as he tried to slow his runaway pulse. It didn't work. He stared at the bathroom door and listened to the shower. That didn't help his pulse either.

Restless, Matt took off his jacket and tossed it over a chair, hardly noticing the

bright furnishings of the hotel room. He stood for a moment, staring at that other door, then started toward it, shedding clothing erratically.

The bathroom was steamy. Behind the opaque shower curtain, he could barely make out the shape of her body. Hesitating only momentarily, Matt pulled the curtain aside and stepped into the hot, wet enclosure.

She turned and smiled slowly. "What took you so long?"

For a moment Matt could only stare at her. His gaze moved slowly over her lovely face, lingering to watch droplets of water trickle gently down the slope of her firm, full breasts.

Then he bent his head, his mouth touching hers very lightly, tongue searching out the glittering drops of water. His hand were stroking her body, learning the shape of her with an unsteady touch. He could feel the fire in her, the response that was instant and total rising up to meet his desire like a wall of flame.

Holding her slippery body, he trailed his lips down her throat, tasting the clean wetness of her flesh. He couldn't get enough of her and he realized their need was too frantic to allow for athletic contortions in the shower. He turned off the shower blindly and swept back the curtain, keeping an arm around her, reaching for towels.

It took an agony of patience to dry each other in hurried silence, and every instant his eyes met hers seemed to stop his heart. Finally he gathered her up, lifting her into his arms and carrying her to the bedroom.

Seconds later, the covers of the wide bed thrown back, Matt gazed down on her lovely face and groaned softly. "Erin... my God, you're so beautiful."

Their gazes locked. He felt one of her hands slide over his chest, the other along his ribs. She was looking at him, he thought dimly, as if he were everything

she had ever wanted out of life.

His hands moved to shape rounded flesh. He traced the valley between her breasts with his lips, moving slowly over the quivering flesh of her stomach. His tongue dipped hotly into her navel, and he felt a stronger quiver, heard a faint sound from her.

Her legs trembled and there was a molten heat in the pit of her belly, burning her as he moved, finally, rising above her with a taut face and blazing eyes, every muscle rigid and quivering. He hesitated, gazing down into the jade fire in her eyes as his body joined hers in a sudden moment. Erin responded instantly to his touch. She accepted him with natural grace, cradling him, holding him. Moving with him in a gentle, steady rhythm that quickened only gradually until the tension grabbed them sharply and flung them upward in a surge of delight that left them clinging wordlessly to each other.

When Erin woke, it was late in the morning. She lay in contentment for a while, her head on Matt's shoulder and

his arms around her. Stirring finally, she carefully eased herself from his embrace and slid from the bed. She found his discarded shirt on the floor near the bathroom and picked it up, shrugging into it. A few moments later she spoke softly into the telephone, ordering breakfast for them.

After breakfast in bed—Matt announced his intention of remaining in the hotel for a week. At least.

"We don't have any clothes," she reminded him.

"We don't need any."

"People might wonder."

"Would that bother you?"

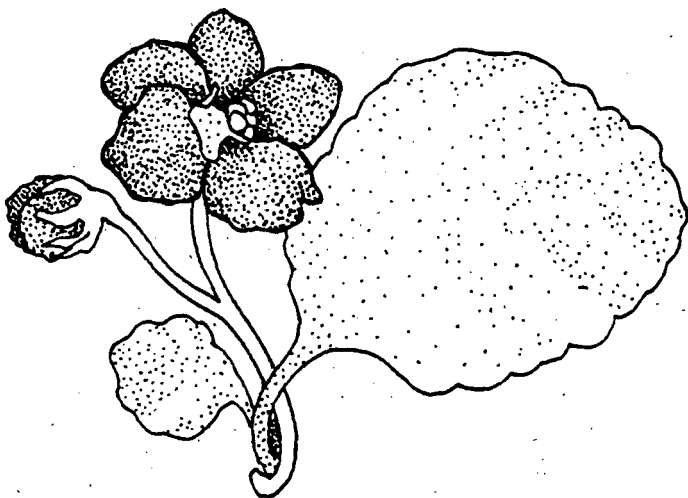
"Of course not, darling. We'll pitch a tent in Times Square if you like—" Her offer ended on a gasp as he kissed her.

"That's the first time," he said between kisses, "you've called me darling. We'll stay here two weeks."

"But, darling—"

"Three weeks."

Erin giggled and abandoned the world.♥



ORIGINAL
ROMANCE

Two Falls For Love

By the time cocktail waitress Tina Fowler discovers that handsome Luke Henderson is a minister, it's already too late; he's stolen her heart. But what kind of future can the two possibly have?

KARLYN THAYER

Tina Fowler's car coughed and lurched and finally died at the side of an out-of-the way country road. She knew why. It was out of gas.

She rested her forehead against the steering wheel, already feeling the icy wind blowing in through the cracks now that the heater was no longer running. It was her own fault. If she hadn't allowed herself to get so angry at the family dinner, she would have stopped for gas before heading home.

As it was, she had barreled out of town at sixty, thinking of nothing except getting away.

Feeling her feet grow cold, she looked up, wondering what to do. It was starting to grow dark. She wondered if there were a farmhouse nearby. She couldn't remember passing any lights. The snow was falling rapidly now, erasing the highway and muffling the sounds of the world. She felt absolutely alone. The prospect of staying

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alone in the car was frightening and discouraging.

She sat for a long time, the helplessness of her situation slowly sinking in. If the storm didn't let up, she could very well freeze here tonight. It crossed her mind that it wouldn't hurt to say a small prayer.

A pair of headlights appeared on the road ahead of her. She gripped the steering wheel, wondering what to do. She needed help, but she had no idea what kind of person might be driving that car. The *help* might be worse than freezing. As the car drew nearer, she made her decision—to take a chance with the driver.

Stepping from her car, she walked to the center of the road, her black heels filling with snow and the icy wind striking her neck like a blow. With one hand clutching her jacket to her neck, she waved valiantly at the approaching car, hoping it might be a family.

It wasn't. It was a single man. He stopped his car and got out. He was very tall, Tina observed, slender and tall. Only a few pounds kept him from being too thin. He had enormous dark eyes and a pale, haunted look. Until he smiled.

The smile made all the difference. His face was transformed from haunted to welcoming, warm and friendly.

"My car. . ." she began lamely.

"Get in mine, quickly. There's no point in standing out in this wind. Hurry up, now."

Tina took a deep breath and walked to his car. She would simply have to trust him. She had no other choice. Inside the car, the warm air from the heater blasted onto her frigid feet. "Thank you," she said, overwhelmed by the heat.

He put the car in gear and began to drive forward slowly. "I'm Luke Henderson," he said.

"Tina Fowler. I was getting ready to spend the night there, in my car. I was *not* looking forward to it."

"The temperature's supposed to drop well below zero tonight. You were lucky I came along." Tina remembered the prayer she had muttered. Perhaps it hadn't been luck that had sent him along at just the right time.

"What are you doing on this road anyway?" Tina asked. "It doesn't go much of anywhere."

"I intended to call on some people I know, but in the snow I think I must have missed the turn to their home. What are you doing out here?"

"I *thought* I was taking a short cut, from Blakely to Redmond. It was a mistake, obviously."

"You live in Redmond?"

"Yes."

"So do I, but I think we're better off heading to Blakely tonight." He glanced across the car at Tina. "You look like you've been crying." His voice was very kind, very sympathetic, inviting her to talk to him about whatever was bothering her.

"How could you tell?" she asked.

"Mostly by the redness in those lovely brown eyes of yours. What were you crying about?" The car continued along the road slowly, with Luke fighting the slippery ice.

Tina opened her purse and took out her mirror. In the little remaining daylight, she saw her mascara was slightly smeared and her dark curls were windblown. Her lipstick was gone completely. The only thing left of the face she'd left home with was her gold hoop earrings. "These eyes are not lovely," she said, returning the mirror to her purse. "But thanks for saying so."

"You were going to tell me why you were crying," he said gently.

"Was I?" His voice really was soothing, his manner inviting. "It was no big deal. Nothing traumatic, I mean. Just my family. I had dinner with my folks and

my older sister and the whole time all three of them were on my case. They don't like where I live and they don't like my friends and they don't like my job and they don't like the way I dress. You'd think they could give me a break."

"How old are you?"

"Old enough. Twenty-six."

"You look younger than that. Where do you work?"

"I'm a cocktail waitress. I work at the Key Lounge in Redmond. It's a very nice place. Very clean, very nice people. I'm not ashamed of it. It's a *nice* place."

"Hold on! I'm not criticizing you. There's nothing wrong with being a cocktail waitress."

"Tell that to my parents. They want me to get married. Like my sister."

"And why haven't you married? Looking at you, I don't doubt you've been asked."

"I don't know. I look at my sister's life and I don't see anything there I want. It's like she's had her kids and now what's left for her? I want more."

"Like what? Wealth? Fame?"

"No—something else. Something elusive. I can't tell you what it is because I don't know what it is. Does that make any sense?"

"Yes, I understand what you're saying."

"What about you? What do you do?"

He didn't get a chance to answer as the car went into a small skid sideways across the road. Tina clutched the door handle until the car straightened out and went ahead at the same slow rate. "It's incredibly slick," Luke said, the strain showing in his voice, "You may end up spending the night in a car after all. It seems to be getting worse."

The seriousness of the situation came to Tina as she peered into the darkness. Snow was beginning to form drifts on the road. If the drifts got deeper, they would

eventually be stopped.

"There's a little town somewhere along here," Tina said. "Not really a town, but a wide spot in the road. I remember passing it, but I can't remember how far back it was."

"If we can find it, it may save our hides."

"You think it's that serious?"

"It could be. The snow keeps getting deeper."

Again Tina strained her eyes into the vast darkness, but she saw no signs of life. Neither of them felt like talking as the car continued to crawl along. Bound together as they were—two strangers in a life and death situation—there was no need to talk. Tina kept thinking that any time the snow would lighten and stop, that any moment they would come upon the little town she had seen, but they only went on and on at the same slow pace. Dinner with her parents seemed a lifetime ago, and she felt she'd known Luke Henderson for half a lifetime, at least.

On and on they went, and the snow fell heavier and heavier. They could see nothing except the tiny patch of whiteness illuminated by the car's headlights. Tina was afraid they might drive right past the little town without seeing it. "This is really getting *serious*, isn't it?"

Luke nodded grimly. "I had no idea it was going to get this bad. I would never have started out."

"But if you hadn't started out..."

"You'd still be in your car."

"Yes." Suddenly she laughed. "At least if I've got to go, I'll go with company."

Luke smiled. "Glad to be of service."

"Oh, we're not actually going to *die* are we?"

"I don't know," he replied calmly. "I can't see into the future."

"You don't sound very scared."

"I'm concerned—concerned about

getting you to safety if I possibly can. But I'm not afraid to die, if that's what you mean."

"You're not? You're really not?"

"No, and neither should you."

"I don't know," Tina said, biting her lip. "I don't want to die until I get back at my sister for all the rotten things she said to me."

Luke laughed. "If revenge is what it takes to keep you going, then revenge is what we'll use. What did she say to you?"

"She said all the girls who work at the Key Lounge are tramps."

"And what did you say?"

"I said that I was no tramp—and I'm not, by the way—and I said I didn't know about the other girls but it wasn't really any of my sister's business whether they were tramps or not because she's not exactly perfect herself."

"Good for you. 'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.'"

"That's right. And my sister's got a long way to go to be perfect. I think she and my parents pick on me just because they don't have anything better to do. You know how people are. They get bored so they start looking around for things to criticize in other people. And here's me, living away from home, working as a cocktail waitress, just *asking* for them to take potshots at me. What they're *really* afraid of is that I might have a little bit of fun. God forbid I should have some fun." She paused and sighed. "They love me. I know they love me."

Luke glanced at her. "*Are* you having fun?"

"Not so far, but I plan to start any time now."

"You have a lot of insight into what makes people tick. That's a very valuable trait—being able to understand people, why they do things, why they *don't* do things."

Tina looked at him gratefully. "You

see? You're *nice*. You think I have a valuable trait. You think I'm an all right person. Why can't *they* see that? Sometimes it makes me want to give up."

The car skidded a little and lost its momentum. When Luke tried to right it the tires spun. He put the car into low gear and they crept forward again for another mile before the drifting snow stopped them once more. In the light from the dashboard, they looked at each other. "We have to make a decision," Luke said solemnly. "We're not going to make it much farther in the car."

"All the books say you should stay with the car," Tina said.

"I know. But I also know that little town has got to be near. It might be right around the next bend." He eased the car forward again, but progress was now measured by feet, not miles. At last they hit a drift high enough to stop the car altogether.

"You stay here and keep the heater running," Luke said. "I'll walk ahead and try to get help."

"I'd rather walk with you."

"You don't have walking shoes."

It was true. Her black heels were part of her waitress uniform. He didn't know she wore the rest of her uniform under her coat—a skimpy uniform at best.

"But like you said, it can't be far. It can't be more than a few hundred yards up the road. Look, I've got a scarf in my pocket, and gloves. Let me go with you."

"It's up to you," he said slowly. "I think it would be wiser to stay."

"I know it would be wiser, but I still want to go."

"All right. Once we're out there, hold my hand. I don't want to lose you."

As soon as they were outside, Tina regretted her choice. She almost turned and went back to the car, but Luke's firm grip on her hand led her on. Her toes were cold in seconds and the snow covered the

tops of her shoes. She felt the wind on her legs. Her short red waitress skirt and her skimpy red top were doing nothing to keep out the cold. With her free hand, she held her coat around her neck, trying to keep the wind out.

The firm confidence in Luke's steps kept her going. She had to hurry to keep up with his long strides, but at least moving was keeping her blood going. She could not remember ever having been this cold before. She tried not to think about it.

They went on and on through the whiteness. The car had long since disappeared behind them. Tina remembered the meal she had left half-eaten at her mother's table. She could have used it now—hot homemade soup, hot coffee. She could no longer feel her feet at all. She knew they were still down there because she could see them moving, but she had no feeling in them.

"How're you doing?" Luke asked, his voice barely audible in the fierce wind.

"Not too good," Tina admitted. "I should have stayed in the car, like you said."

"Keep walking. That's the most important thing—to keep going. It can't be far."

She stumbled then, on something under the snow, and went to her knees. He quickly pulled on her hand to try to get her up. She didn't want to get up. She wanted to *give up*. "You go on without me," she said.

"You've been watching too many movies," he said, kneeling in the snow next to her. "I'm not going on without you and you know that. Now come on, get on your feet and walk."

He stood and pulled on her hand until she got up once more. Again they walked through the drifts, which were growing progressively deeper. How long had they been walking? It seemed like hours. "I'm

not going to make it," Tina said.

"Yes, you are." He was silent, and then his voice came back to her again. "I see a light."

"Where?" Tina asked, coming alive. She shaded her eyes from the falling snow and searched the darkness ahead. She could see nothing. "I don't see it."

"I do. It's up ahead. It's not far."

She kept walking, and walking and walking, looking for the light Luke said he saw. She still couldn't see it, but she kept walking. Until she fell again. He tugged at her hand. "Get up or I'll carry you," he said.

"I can't get up and you can't carry me."

"I can." She felt his arms under her arms, lifting her. She was amazed he could lift her at all, let alone walk with her through the drifts.

"I can't let you do this," she said. "Put me down. I'll walk. Somehow." He carried her for awhile longer, then eased her down. She leaned for a moment against him. She knew now he had made up the light just to keep her going. She also knew she didn't have any energy left. She took a step, two steps, three steps. I'll get to ten steps, she thought, and then I'll quit. Four, five, six steps. She looked up. She saw a light.

She took steps seven and eight and looked again. Still there. She took steps nine and ten and looked again. There really, truly was a light, glowing weakly in the distance. "Luke, do you see it?"

"Yes."

"I can make it now. I think I can make it."

"I *know* you can. Come on, lean on me. We're almost there."

Seeing the dot of light grow larger and larger was enough to keep Tina going the last few yards. As they came up at last to the building, they saw it was an all-purpose establishment—gas station,

general store, and hotel. But although the light was on, the front door was locked. Tina dropped into a shivering heap while Luke pounded on the door.

In a few moments, they heard sounds and finally the door was opened. Without waiting to be invited in, Luke and Tina fell across the threshold before the astonished eyes of the old proprietor.

He did not need to ask where they'd come from or what they wanted. Leaving them huddled around the pot-bellied stove in the lobby, he went to wake his wife. He returned with a blanket, which he put around Tina.

"My name's Wilson," the man said, "You two are damn lucky, you know that? It's thirty-six below out there, with the wind chill."

Neither Luke nor Tina spoke. They were too busy soaking up the warmth of the room. Before long, Mr. Wilson's wife brought them soup and hot coffee. Tina was shaking so badly she could barely hold her spoon. Her feet were beginning to hurt, and her fingers, as circulation returned to them. The pain was intense and she fought back tears as she struggled to hold the cup of coffee Mrs. Wilson had so kindly provided.

It was nearly an hour before Tina felt strong enough to stand. She wore thick wool socks, now, also provided by Mrs. Wilson. Luke had been moving around for some time now, talking to Mr. Wilson, but he looked pale and tired. It had been an ordeal for both of them.

Holding the blanket around her shoulders, Tina slowly got to her feet. She was dreadfully tired, but other than that she felt almost normal. Her feet still worked. Mr. Wilson nodded his approval of her attempts to walk. "You'll survive. You two will be wanting a room, now." He got up and shuffled over to the counter that served as the hotel check-in desk. Tina followed him as if in a daze.

"You two are married, ain't you?" Mr. Wilson asked.

"Yes," Tina said, without a second's hesitation. Luke did not dispute her. She didn't know why she said it, but she knew she wanted to be with Luke.

"That's good," Mr. Wilson continued, "because we only have one room available right now. If you're ready, I'll take you on up."

Still clutching the blanket, Tina followed Mr. Wilson upstairs, listening to Luke's steps behind her, wondering if she'd made a mistake. Mr. Wilson showed them to their room, small and old, but warm.

"I'll leave you now," he said. "If you need anything, come down. Have a good night."

"Thank you," Luke said. "We really appreciate all you've done for us. The food, and: . . ."

"It's nothing," Mr. Wilson said, waving off Luke's attempts at thanks. "You folks get some rest. The snow plows will be out in the morning, most likely, and we'll get your car."

With that, he closed the door, leaving them alone. They looked at each other across the space of the room. "Why did you tell him we were married?" Luke asked.

Tina ducked her head and shrugged. "I don't know."

Luke sat down on the bed and rubbed his eyes. "I suppose it doesn't really matter. I'm too tired to take advantage of your lovely body."

"I'm tired, too," Tina said anxiously. "Why don't we just crawl into bed like proper strangers and get some rest." She took off her coat, wishing she had something to sleep in. The waitress uniform was too tight. She crossed to the closet and opened it, but it was empty.

"Good Lord, what are you wearing?" Luke asked.

She turned, surprised. "It's my uniform."

"No wonder your folks are upset. It doesn't exactly cover you up."

"It *does*," Tina said defensively. "It covers everything that's important to be covered." She stepped to the center of the room and modeled the short-skirted uniform. "See? It's perfectly decent."

"I see all right. I see plenty."

"Well don't you *like* what you see?"

"I like it very much, and now I'd like to change the subject. I'm going to turn off the light and get into bed." He looked at her with those large, dark eyes. "Tina, . . ."

"What?"

"I'm very tired. You're tired. Let's leave it at that, okay?"

"Well, of *course*. What did you think? That I was going to try to seduce you or something?"

"No, I . . . let's just go to sleep, please." He shut off the overhead light. When her eyes adjusted, Tina saw he had moved to the bed. She hurried to her own side and slid under the covers. Only then did she unfasten the top of the waitress uniform and wriggle out of it. Then she unzipped the short skirt and slid it down, followed by her pantyhose.

"What are you *doing* over there?" Luke asked, annoyed.

"I'm getting undressed, what do you think? Did you think I was going to sleep in that outfit?"

"Are you through?"

"Yes I am. Sorry to *bother* you."

"All right. Are you settled in? Sleep well. I'll see you in the morning."

"Yes, good night." She turned over. The bed felt wonderful, sheer pleasure, but her feet were still cold. They didn't hurt anymore, but they were cold. "My feet are cold," she said.

Luke didn't say anything. She wondered if he could possibly be asleep

already. "Luke?" she said softly.

"*What?*" He was definitely annoyed.

"My feet are cold."

"I heard you the first time. What do you want me to do? I saved your life tonight. Now I'm supposed to take care of your feet, *too?*"

On top of everything else that had happened that day, the unkind words were too much for Tina. She started to cry. Luke groaned and turned over.

"I'm sorry. Look, I'm sorry." He put his arm across her back. "I didn't mean to be short with you. It's just that I'm worn out, and there's another matter."

"What?" She sniffed. "What *else* is wrong?"

"You in that short skirt. I don't think you're aware—I don't think you know quite what you're doing."

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean is, I'm sorry I snapped at you. It was caused by a certain frustration, and right now I would simply like to go to sleep. Put your feet over here on me if you want to."

"Really?"

"If it will make you happy. And quiet."

She moved her feet until they were in contact with his skin. He jumped a little, but he didn't say anything.

"Good night," Tina said.

"Good night. Sleep well."

Tina closed her eyes. Bit by bit, her feet began to warm up. She didn't think she would be able to sleep, but eventually she did.

She woke much later, aware of an overwhelming warmth, aware suddenly of Luke's body next to hers. She could hear him breathing. "Are you awake?" she whispered.

"Yes." His voice was deep and troubled.

"It's so warm."

"Yes."

She turned on her side to be closer to him. She heard his breath catch. She snuggled closer. This was not a stranger. This was the man who had saved her life. She felt she had known him forever.

There was something about a life and death struggle, Tina thought, that cut through all the normal restraints of society. Perfectly relaxed and perfectly sure she knew what she was doing, she put her arms around him, crushing her breasts to his chest.

She heard his breathing again, harder now. He shifted and slid one arm under her, drawing her closer. This time it was Tina's turn to gasp as the warmth of his body enveloped her. Then he was kissing her and his hands were moving over her, and her body was waking up. She did not think about what she was doing, or worry about it. She opened herself to him completely. If there were consequences, she would worry about them another day.

Luke's lovemaking was slow and restrained, drawn out to the point where she thought she would go mad with pleasure. She realized with a sudden surge of affection that she'd never been with anyone who cared about what *she* was feeling. The two brief encounters she'd had before had been with boys, not men. He led her on and on to a pinnacle of delight, and then she found herself wonderfully exhausted.

"Are you all right?" Luke asked tenderly.

"I'm all right," she said in a small voice. "That was a new experience for me. I never *participated* before."

"Really?"

"Really."

He sighed and lay back on his pillow. "Tina, Tina."

"What?"

"You're a girl-woman."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all." He didn't

say anything else for a few moments. "Do you think you can sleep again?"

"Yes. Can you?"

"Yes. Get some rest. Good night."

She snuggled up tightly against him and yawned. "Good night." Her last thought before she slept was the she'd never been quite so warm and quite so happy as she was now.

Luke was gone from the bed when morning light broke into the room, waking Tina. She felt rested, and pleased with herself. She stretched, then finally got up out of the warm bed. She pulled on her coat, not willing to stuff herself into the uniform again. A few minutes later, she made her way downstairs, Mrs. Wilson was in the kitchen. She smiled and set out a cup of coffee when she saw Tina.

"They left early to try to get your car out," Mrs. Wilson said to Tina's unasked question. "The storm let up sometime early this morning. I've heard the snowplows going by. They should be back soon."

Tina nodded. "I don't know how we can ever thank you for taking us in. I was *so cold*."

"I'm glad we were here for you. Your husband seems like such a nice young man."

Tina quickly hid her ringless hand under the table. "Oh he is," she said. "He's very—*nice*."

"Thin, though," Mrs. Wilson said, putting eggs and bacon in front of Tina, along with toast. Tina reached for the food hungrily, forgetting her manners in her hunger. "You ought to try to fatten him up," Mrs. Wilson continued.

"Oh I try," Tina said, concentrating on the delicious food in front of her, barely aware of what she was saying. "I give him, you know, fried potatoes and donuts and so on, but he's got one of those metabolisms. He burns it all off and I

can't make him eat more than he wants." She was enjoying her little fantasy as she reached for another piece of toast. "I think sometimes husbands are just like little boys," she continued, "the way you have to take care of them."

"Isn't *that* the truth," Mrs. Wilson said, laughing. "Do you two have any children?"

"Not yet," Tina said, taking another bit of fried egg, "but we're trying. You can't rush Mother Nature, of course. I only want two, but Luke wants a large family. I tell him, if he wants a large family he's going to have to help take care of them. I'm not going to be one of those wives that gets stuck with the kids all the time. You've seen women like that. Life becomes pure drudgery. Of course, Luke knows all that, and I wouldn't expect him to put me in that kind of situation."

Tina looked up from her breakfast. Mrs. Wilson was looking past Tina. As Tina turned, she realized Luke had come into the kitchen at some point. She'd been so busy eating and talking about their married life she hadn't heard him. Her face flushed red as she wondered how much he'd heard.

"We got the car out, *dear*," he said. "We can get started as soon as you're ready."

Tina tried to smile. "I need to run upstairs and get my things, then I'll be ready." She scampered upstairs, rolled her uniform up, and looked around. Her shoes were there, but they were ruined from the walk through the snow. She picked them up and carried them down. "I'm afraid these shoes have had it," she said, holding them up. "I'd like to keep these socks, Mrs. Wilson. I can send them back to you, or..."

"No, no, we've got plenty of socks. You keep them. And stop by and see us sometime. Stop by when you have your baby."

"We'll do that," Luke said. Tina couldn't tell if he was angry. He swooped her up and carried her the few steps to the car, then deposited her inside and shut her door.

She looked around at all the whiteness and brightness left by the storm. It was so different from the night before. After a minute, Luke got in the car and they were soon driving down the road toward Redmond.

"All right," Luke said, "what was that all about—all that baby business."

"I'm *sorry*. It didn't hurt anything, did it? I mean, I was just *talking*."

"But what was the point? Why were you telling her things that weren't true?"

"Oh, I don't know Luke. Things just pop into my head all the time and I say them before I think. I liked the way it sounded, us being married. I'm sorry, all right? I didn't mean to offend you or anything."

"I was not offended."

"Then don't be so mad."

He drove without speaking for several miles. Tina sat in her corner and pouted. Finally he looked at her. "Do you belong to the Automobile Club or anything? I mean, is there someone who can help you get your car?"

Tina sat up and decided to behave like an adult. "My brother-in-law will get it for me if I apologize for running out on dinner the other night. *Last* night, I guess it was. Yesterday. It seems like longer. It seems like it was a month ago."

"To me, too," he said. "I can drop you off somewhere in Redmond."

"My apartment's on Fifth Street, over the Elks Lodge."

"All right." His tone was terse and somewhat unforgiving. Tina felt rejected, but she supposed she had no one to blame but herself. She had wanted Luke's respect, but her little story to Mrs. Wilson had been immature and silly. She didn't

really blame him for wanting to get rid of her.

With the roads cleared by the snow plows, they arrived in Redmond a short time later. Luke drove directly to the Elks building. He peered out of the windshield, looking up. "I didn't know they had apartments up there."

"Oh yeah, three. They're pretty cheap, because it gets noisy when the Elks party. The rest of the time it's quiet."

"And you live by yourself?"

"Well, mostly. There's a neighborhood cat that comes and goes, but mostly I'm by myself."

"And you work at the Key Lounge, and—what else?"

"That's about all."

"Haven't you given any thought to the future? Are you going to work at the Key Lounge forever?"

"No, of course not. I haven't decided yet what I want to do. It's not so easy, deciding."

"No, I guess not." He looked across the seat at her, his dark eyes sympathetic and kind. "You're a sweet girl, Tina."

"That sound suspiciously like goodbye."

"I'm glad we—met."

"Yeah. Thanks for saving my life and all. Drop by sometime, if you're in the neighborhood."

He nodded. She knew he wouldn't. She got out of his car and waved, then went inside to her apartment. It seemed unbelievably empty.

Life quickly returned to normal for Tina—normal, but somehow much more bleak than it had been before Luke. Now she knew there was something she was missing, and that something was Luke Henderson. Many times she thought of telephoning him, but her pride would not allow it. Besides, he might be married. She'd never bothered to ask him. She'd

never asked him anything, so it was her own fault that she didn't know.

It was also her own fault that she'd told those stories to Mrs. Wilson. She'd made a mistake, and now she was going to have to live with it and hope she'd learned something from the experience.

On Friday afternoon, as she was returning from grocery shopping, she ran into Father O'Malley, the local Catholic priest. Father O'Malley made it his business to know everyone in his parish, Catholic or not, and he greeted Tina enthusiastically. "You still work at the Key Lounge?" he asked.

"Yes. A person's got to eat."

"Of course," he said, laughing. "I only wondered how you were getting along."

"I'm getting by. Thanks for asking."

"Do you have any extra time? The reason I ask is we're opening up a soup kitchen and we could use some help."

Shifting a bag of groceries, she peered at him. "What kind of help?"

"Now don't look so worried. It's an interdenominational soup kitchen. We need young people like you to help with the serving. It wouldn't take much of your time—an hour or two a couple of nights a week. What do you say?"

Tina considered. It wasn't as if she was busy all the time. "Okay, Father. I can do that."

"Good girl. If you can, be at the church tomorrow afternoon around five."

"Is that where it is—the soup kitchen?"

He sighed. "Yes, we're having to work out of the church for the time being, until we find someplace more suitable."

"Okay. I'll be there." She climbed the stairs to her apartment, glad the soup kitchen was being started up. There were a lot of hungry people in this part of the city, and it would give her something to do—something *helpful*.

That night, as she lay in bed, she thought of Luke—thought of the way he

had held her so tightly and so tenderly, thought of how much he had wanted her, that night, in the Wilsons' bed. She told herself it was over, that she was out of his life, but she didn't want to believe it. She rolled over and hugged her pillow and whispered his name before she finally fell asleep.

The next evening, promptly at five, Tina showed up at the Catholic church. She wore jeans and a red blouse that brought out the red in her cheeks—not that it mattered. She had come to work. When she checked in with Father O'Malley, she was assigned to the soup table.

"We should have someone pretty ladling out the soup," he said. "A pretty face will be an encouragement to come back." He turned and motioned to an older woman to come over. "Mable, this is Tina. Fix her up. She's going to help serve."

Tina looked at Mable. "What's he mean—fix me up?"

"Not much," Mable said. "Turn around here." She tied a white dish towel around Tina's waist to act as an apron. "Okay, you're fixed up. That's the official uniform."

"Thanks. Very classy, isn't it?" Mable grinned and Tina wandered over to the main serving table. At least this "uniform" would not get her into trouble like her other one. She helped move some clean bowls to the table, along with baskets of bread and spoons. Before long, the table was ready except for the soup, which was simmering on the church stove. They were ready. Father O'Malley opened the doors, letting in a stream of people, young and old, men and women, all hungry.

The soup was brought to the table—a thick vegetable soup with chicken. It smelled delicious. Tina immediately took up her ladle and began filling the bowls

thrust toward her. She had filled only about ten bowls when she heard Father O'Malley calling for everyone's attention.

She looked up and saw him at the main table, banging on his water glass with his spoon. "People! People! Please hear me for just a moment." He waited until the noise level dropped. "I know you're all hungry so I won't keep you waiting. I want to welcome you to St. Benedict's Church, but as you know, this is a non-denominational kitchen. Our brothers and sisters from churches all through the city are helping us here tonight. And now, before we all dig into this delicious soup, I'm going to have Reverend Luke Henderson get up here and give the blessing." Tina dropped the ladle she was holding. It splashed into the soup as she stood there, open-mouthed. "Reverend Luke is from Redmont United Methodist," Father O'Malley continued, "and he was kind enough to come down here tonight to help us out."

Before Tina's astonished eyes, Luke rose from a seat across the room and delivered a short prayer. Then everyone was talking again and bowls were being pushed toward her. In a panic, she ran to the kitchen and located another ladle.

She filled bowls quickly, trying to make up for lost time. She was getting sloppy, but she didn't care. Her heart was beating in crazy confusion as she tried to do her job and think about Luke—to think about him simply *being* there, to wonder if he'd seen her, to ponder his being a minister, of all things.

A *minister*. She couldn't decide how she felt about that particular piece of information. It was both upsetting and intriguing. She kept filling soup bowls until she reached the bottom of the pot and called for another. They brought her a second pot, but the line of hungry people was beginning to dwindle now. She saw Father O'Malley at the end of the line,

with Luke. Luke looked so handsome, she thought, tall and kind-looking.

"There's so much soup left!" Father O'Malley said, worried.

"It's only the first night," Tina reminded him. "Next time there will be more people, when word gets out." He took his bowl and moved on, and there was Luke, watching her. Her pulse rate went off the chart.

Her hands were shaking badly as she tried to fill a bowl for him. He reached out and covered her hand with his, steadying it. "Get yourself a bowl and come sit with me," he said gently.

Tina managed to put a small amount of soup in a bowl, then she grabbed a slice of bread and a spoon. She walked unsteadily to the table where Luke was sitting with Father O'Malley.

Easing down next to Luke, she noted Father O'Malley was busy talking with several other people. She smiled shyly at Luke. "I'll bet you were surprised to see me here, like I was surprised to see you."

"Not really," Luke said. "I knew you'd be here."

"You did?"

"This soup is good. You ought to taste it." He took a bite of his bread. "I asked Father O'Malley to track you down about two weeks ago. I was curious to know if you would volunteer to help here."

Tina set her spoon down and stared at the table. She had lost her appetite. For two weeks she'd been convinced she was out of Luke's life, that he didn't care for her, that their one night had been passion and nothing more. Now he was telling her she'd been on his mind the whole time.

"You're not eating," he said.

She dutifully picked up her spoon, but she still couldn't eat. Her heart was running away with the nearness of him. "You were testing me. Seeing if I would show up here was a test."

"I didn't mean for it to be a test, but if

it was, you passed."

"I didn't know you were a minister. That night. I didn't know."

"What difference would it have made?" he asked with a smile. "Are you saying you wouldn't have slept with me if you'd known?"

"Shhh, be quiet. You want everyone to hear?"

He laughed. "I'm not a monk. I never took any vows of celibacy."

"Well, maybe not, but we're in a church."

He laughed again. "I'm glad you came tonight. I'm glad you volunteered."

"They weren't too happy about it at the Key Lounge. I'll have to make up for it by doing a double shift some night." She paused. "I guess it was worth it, getting to see you again."

"Did you get your car back all right?"

"Oh yes. My brother-in-law picked it up for me. He even delivered it, along with a lecture. Which I didn't need. I learned a basic rule of life that night: never run out of gas in a blizzard unless there's a Methodist minister in the vicinity."

"I learned a basic rule of life that night, too: never assume you can control your passion when you're in bed with a beautiful woman."

She smiled. "I'm sorry I led you astray."

"Don't be. I'm not sorry."

"You're not?"

"On the contrary." He looked at her directly now, his dark eyes sincere. "Until you came along, I was in a rut—not enjoying anything, not feeling anything, just doing my job and not even doing that very well. You woke me up. I'm grateful."

"Glad to help."

"It was more than just a help, Tina. It was a renewal. Of my energy and my appetite for life."

"You were mad at me, though, for

those things I said to Mrs. Wilson.”

Again he looked at her with those kind, dark eyes. “I admit that confused me, but I wasn’t mad at you.”

“I don’t know what got into me. I don’t normally go around making up fairy tales to tell to strangers. But sometimes things pop into my head.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Luke said. Father O’Malley said something then that Tina did not hear, and Luke turned his attention away from her. Tina thought about how cold she’d been that night, and then how warm she’d been snuggled up next to Luke. She wanted to touch him now, to put her hand on his leg.

She restrained herself, and then even moved a little bit away from him. The tension of being near him without being able to touch him was getting to be unbearable. She felt hot, very hot.

She looked around. People were finishing up their soup and beginning to wander out. To keep her mind off of Luke’s body, she rose and began gathering empty soup bowls. She carried a load of them to the kitchen, then went back for another load, not looking at Luke, not wanting him to see how much she wanted him.

There was plenty of work to do to clean up, and she stayed busy. Luke and Father O’Malley pitched in and helped with the clean-up as soon as they had finished their soup. With everyone helping, the work went quickly. Father O’Malley stood on a chair and thanked everyone, asking them to return the following week. Eventually, he said, they hoped to be serving every night, but for now once a week would have to suffice.

“I’ll walk you home,” Luke said, appearing magically at Tina’s side.

It was cold outside but it was only two blocks to Tina’s apartment. She thrust one hand in her pocket and looped the other through Luke’s arm. “We’re always walking in the cold together.

We’ve got to stop meeting like this..”

He didn’t say anything, but walked slowly through the cold night air. “Have your parents gotten over being angry with you?” he finally asked.

“Oh sure. You know how parents are. They just want me to be happy, only it’s their idea of happiness, not mine.”

“And what is *your* idea of happiness?”

She almost said, *being in bed with you*, but thought she’d better not. “I’m not sure. I think if I could do things to *help* people, like tonight, that would suit me. I know what I *don’t* want, and that’s to get tied down with too many children.”

“I thought you wanted children. It’s what you told Mrs. Wilson.”

“What I said to Mrs. Wilson was something out of the blue with no connection to reality. I knew that at the time and I don’t know why I said it.”

“So you’re saying you *don’t* want to get married?”

“Oh Luke, don’t confuse me. I’m saying I don’t *know* what I want. Most mar-

He smiled at her. “It’s not easy.” They had reached the Elks building now, and Luke opened the door to the vestibule. They stopped there, in the space between the two doors, and looked at each other. He reached for her then, pulling her close, kissing her with a fierce hunger, a demanding hunger that left her gasping for breath.

“Oh Luke, I’ve missed you so much. Wanted you so much. I was sure you didn’t want me.”

“Oh Luke, I’ve missed you so much. Wanted you so much. I was sure you didn’t want me.”

“I had to think about it, Tina. I’m not normally an impulsive person.” He leaned over and kissed her again.

“I understand.”

He kissed her once more. “Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

She stepped back away from him.

"Luke, I can't do that."

"You can't?"

"How would it look, if someone saw you leaving here late tonight or early in the morning? It would be very bad for your reputation. Not to mention mine. You think I want to be known as the lady who seduced the minister?"

"Tina..."

"No, now, you're the one that decided to be a preacher. You have a reputation to uphold and I'm going to help you uphold it. What kind of person would I be to take you to my apartment and then the next thing we knew you'd be kicked out of your job, fired, your career down the drain, and then *you'd* be in line at the soup kitchen, all because of me. No, sir, I won't allow it."

He stared at her for a moment, then broke out laughing. "You are full of surprises, and they're all good ones."

"Well really, what kind of girl do you think I am? I mean, I don't go around sleeping with people any more than you do." She looked at him shyly. "It's not that I don't *want* to ask you in."

He leaned against the wall of the vestibule. "Strength of character," he said.

"What about it?"

"You've got some."

"I've got a lot."

His warm smile filled the darkness of the tiny vestibule. "Yes, a lot of strength of character. Come to church tomorrow?"

Tina hadn't thought about church. "Where?" she asked.

"My church. It's on Maple Street."

"I know where it is. I've seen it. What time?"

"The service is at ten."

"All right. I must be turning good or something. First the soup kitchen, and now church."

"It doesn't hurt, does it?"

She smiled. "No, it doesn't hurt. Not

so far."

"All right. I'll leave you now. I'll see you in the morning." He paused and looked back. "Count on lunch."

Tina climbed the stairs slowly and thoughtfully, wondering what she was getting herself into. She thought about how worried she would have been if Luke had turned out to be the leader of a motorcycle gang.

But there was no reason to worry when you found out the man you were almost in love with was a minister. Was there?

But she *did* worry. In her mind, she heard the voice of the church women: Did you hear? His girlfriend's a cocktail waitress at the Key Lounge. Everybody knows all the girls who work there are nothing but tramps.

They would never allow him to go on seeing her and keep his job. It might be better, she reflected, if she didn't show up at church tomorrow. She would let this small romance cool off before it got started. Because maybe the church ladies would be right. Maybe she really wasn't good enough for him.



She woke at eight the next morning. Rolling out of bed, she remembered the passion of Luke's kiss in the vestibule, and the invitation to church. She knew then she would go ahead and go, and if the church ladies didn't like it, too bad.

She put on a red sweater and a nice red plaid skirt, conservative enough, she thought for any congregation. The sweater was just a little tight across the bust.

Tina was one of the last ones to enter the church. By the time she got inside, the last pews were filled up and she had to take a seat near the front. She didn't see Luke anywhere as she opened a hymnal and tried to find what everybody else was singing. The song came to an end, then, and everyone sat down.

A man got up and made community announcements and asked if there were any visitors in the church. Tina shrank down in her seat, not wanting to call attention to herself. After a prayer and another hymn, Luke finally appeared and Tina's heart thumped in happy recognition.

He wore an ordinary suit and tie as he took his place in front of the congregation. For a moment, he let his gaze travel out over the faces. He found Tina and smiled a special smile she knew was only for her. And then he began speaking.

Afterward, Tina could not remember so much what he said, but she remembered the basic message: go forward in faith. He had an easy-going delivery that spoke directly to the people, and Tina noticed her neighbors were listening to him intently.

After the service, Tina made her way with the rest of the congregation to the door of the sanctuary. When he saw her, Luke reached for her hand eagerly and pulled her near. "They're serving coffee and doughnuts downstairs," he told her. "Go down and wait for me."

She nodded and squeezed his hand, leaving him there to greet the others still filing out of the church. Downstairs there was noise and laughter as people talked with their friends and neighbors. Tina felt a little out of place, not knowing anyone, but she knew Luke would soon be there to rescue her. She got a cup of coffee and a doughnut and sat down.

There were half a dozen conversations going on around her. She listened to bits and pieces of them until she heard Luke's name mentioned, and then she tuned in to that particular conversation. "I understand Patty is nearly heartbroken," a woman behind Tina said.

"Yes," her friend agreed, "she and Reverend Henderson were practically engaged. What can he be thinking,

treating her like that, neglecting her and so on?"

"I don't know. It's all part of having a *young* preacher. I told the church board to get someone older, someone already married. But did they listen to me?"

"The worst thing is that Patty is such a sweet thing. You know her mama raised her to be a preacher's wife. I can't imagine what's got into him to neglect her so."

"Men! He may be a preacher, but he's still a man." The two women moved away then and Tina sipped her coffee. She felt terribly guilty. *She* suspected that she was the reason why he was neglecting this poor Patty person. It was all *her* fault. She had jumped into bed with him and distracted his attention away from Patty, whose mama had raised her to be a preacher's wife.

Tina found out who Patty was soon enough. As Luke entered the basement, a young woman moved toward him, dressed in a conservative beige suit. While Tina was dark-haired and of medium height, Patty was tall and blonde, and very, very pretty. While Tina watched, Patty took Luke's hand possessively. He looked uncomfortable, but Tina knew he would not be rude. He stood and talked with Patty while she continued to hold his hand.

Tina did not have to be a genius to see what was going on. Patty's body language made it obvious as she leaned toward him, gazed at him longingly and batted her eyelashes. Tina didn't know what to do except sit and patiently wait, fighting the impulse to jump up and run away.

At last Luke disengaged himself from Patty, but he was immediately waylaid by someone else who wanted to talk to him. Tina waited and waited, sipping her coffee that was now cold, feeling more and more out of place. Finally Luke managed to get free from everyone who wanted his attention. He sat down at the table across from Tina.

Tina gave him a wan smile, aware that everyone in the basement was now watching them, including that sweet thing herself, Patty.

"I'm not very comfortable here," Tina said. "I feel like an alien with two heads."

He nodded. "I understand. Let me circulate just a little bit more, and then I'll take you for lunch like I promised."

"Oh, I don't know, Luke. I don't think I belong . . ."

"Hey, don't start that. I'm not going to let these people tell me who I can and can't see. Now sit here like a good girl. I'll be back before you know it."

When he left, Tina felt as if every eye was on her. Everyone was wondering who she was and what she was to Luke. She became terribly self-conscious in the red sweater. She could practically *hear* what people must be saying: So that's the little tart who's stolen him away from Patty.

Tina closed her eyes and thought of Luke's sermon—go forward in faith. Her hand closed tightly on her coffee cup. Abruptly, resolutely, she got up and marched across the room to where Patty stood talking with some other ladies.

"You must be Patty," Tina said.

Patty blinked and looked astonished. "Yes?"

"Luke's told me so much about you. I'm Tina, his cousin. I'm just visiting."

"Ohhhhh," Patty said, smiling now with lots of pretty teeth.

"Ohhhh," the other ladies all said, letting out their breath in relief as they moved off. Their sweet Patty was saved.

"Luke and I are going for lunch," Tina said, matching sweetness with sweetness. "You'll join us, won't you?"

"Well, of course," Patty said, all smiles. "Where are you from, Tina?"

"Oh, I live here in Redmond, but I normally go to the Catholic church. I work at the Catholic church quite a bit. I was one of the first helpers when they organized

their soup kitchen. So I don't get to this part of town too much."

"It's strange Luke never mentioned you."

"Well I've been a sort of black sheep in the family." She paused, wondering what was making her say all these things that weren't true. It must have been some sort of defense against all this brightness and righteousness surrounding her. "He probably didn't tell you about Jimmy Joe, either, did he?"

"Jimmy Joe?" Patty asked.

Tina nodded. "Another cousin of ours. He's up the river, as they say. Grand theft auto."

Everyone looked suitably shocked, so Tina went on. "I probably shouldn't have said anything. I hope you won't tell Luke I mentioned Jimmy Joe. He feels he has a reputation to maintain."

"I won't say anything," Patty promised. "A lot of people have unsavory relatives."

Luke appeared then, looking a little confused at Tina's talking to Patty. He smiled uncertainly. "Luke, Patty's accepted our lunch invitation. Are you ready to go?"

"Uh, yes, yes, I'm ready. Shall we go?"

Tina let Patty sit in the middle of the car as Luke drove them to a nearby hotel that served a brunch buffet. Tina thought the food looked delicious, but she couldn't bring herself to coo over it as Patty did. They filled their plates and found a window table. Luke kept giving Tina curious looks, but she ignored him.

"Your sermon this morning was marvelous," Patty said when they were seated.

"Oh yes," Tina said. "Marvelous."

"I thought it was a little stale, myself," Luke said.

"Oh no, darling!" Patty said. "It was just right."

Darling?

"I thought it was stale, too," Tina said.

"You just said it was marvelous," Patty reminded her.

"Marvelously stale."

Luke grinned at her, not bothered by her insult. Under the table, he moved his leg until it was in contact with Tina's leg. She felt warm all over and started remembering the time they'd spent in bed together, and started wanting him all over again.

"It's not easy to come up with something new and inspiring every week," Luke said.

"Well, you do a wonderful job," Patty said loyally.

Tina felt like being contrary, in contrast to all of Patty's positive sweetness. "I don't know," Tina said thoughtfully. "I don't know if he's really addressing the problems of the people."

Patty looked shocked. "Of course he is! Anyway, I'm not sure it's his job."

"Well, what *is* his job, if it's not to help people with their problems?" Under the table, his leg pressed harder. Tina didn't know if he was warning her to be careful, or if he was suggesting something more intimate. "He could preach all day," Tina continued, "but if he didn't help somebody he wouldn't be worth a hoot."

"I just try to do my best," Luke said. "Sometimes..."

"Oh hush," Patty said. "This is between Tina and me. Tina, anybody who doesn't get something out of Luke's sermons just isn't paying attention."

"I disagree," Tina said, surprising herself. She hadn't been aware that she even had opinions on the subject, but now her opinions were rolling out. "In the world today, with movies and television competing for the people's time and attention, a preacher has to do more than preach. He has to reach out to the people in a new way, on their own terms. Lots of traditions are going by the wayside, and

that includes church traditions. Any church that won't pay attention to changing times is going to end up with its doors shut."

Luke was staring at Tina with amusement and surprise, while Patty was pouting. "I don't care what you say," Patty said. "I still think Luke is just right."

Tina went back to eating a luscious green pepper omelet, wondering what she was doing here with these people, wondering what gave her the right to tell them how to run their church. She didn't belong to any church—not even the Catholic one.

As they finished their lunch, Patty excused herself to go to the ladies' room. Tina watched her, watched the lady-like self-assuredness that Patty possessed as she crossed the room. Tina knew she would never be that confident, never in a hundred years.

Luke reached for Tina's hand. "Why did you invite Patty to lunch?"

She looked at him, her dark eyes confused. "I'm not sure. She seems to think she belongs to you, or you belong to her, or whatever. I felt like such an outsider in the church basement, and everyone was talking about you and Patty. Oh Luke, I didn't want anyone to be unhappy because of me."

He smiled. "That's a kind thought, but it's also an impossible one unless you dig a hole and crawl in. No matter what you do, you're always going to run into a conflict with someone." He paused and looked at her steadily. "You turn me on, Tina. Patty doesn't."

"But she's so nice!"

"That she is. I'm sure she's a virgin. And I'm equally sure I'd just as soon leave her that way. You're exciting. You're juicy. You're a woman."

Tina's heart was running away at his words. "You really think so?"

"Absolutely. I want you, Tina, in my bed and out of my bed. The more I get to know you, the more I like you. I'm delighted to find you have a brain to go with your lovely body."

"Cool it. Here comes Patty." Tina quickly withdrew her hand and sat back in her chair.

Patty smiled at Luke without sitting down. "Oh Luke, there's a lady over there across the room that's got the most precious little baby. You have to come and see it. It's so little and sweet. Please come and see it."

"I've seen babies, Patty. They're all sweet. Except the one that wet on me during the Baptism ceremony."

"Please, Luke, come with me for just a minute. Please!"

Reluctantly, Luke got up and went with Patty. Tina wondered why he didn't give her a firm *no*. Why was he letting himself be pushed around if he really was not interested in Patty? There were too many questions in Tina's mind, and too few answers. She gathered up her coat and purse and slipped out of the restaurant.

She had to walk several blocks back to her car, which was parked in the church parking lot. She didn't mind. The sun was shining and there was a suggestion of spring in the air. As soon as she got back to her car, she drove home and climbed the stairs to her apartment.

The brunch had made her drowsy. Yawning, she pulled her sweater off over her head. Suddenly there was a loud, demanding knock on the door. Leaving the chain hooked, she cracked the door open and peered out. "Luke, what are you doing here?"

"May I come in?"

She could not tell from his voice what he was thinking. She unhooked the chain and let him in, reaching for her sweater to cover herself. He caught her wrist and

swung her around against the wall, pinning her there with his body. Instinctively she struggled against him, breathing hard, aware of her breasts in the lacy bra crushed against him. For a long moment, they stood like that, together, staring at each other.

"Tina..." His voice was low and rough. "Tell me to go. Tell me you don't want me, and I'll clear out of here."

"I—Luke, I *do* want you." He released her and stood back from her, breathing hard, looking at her hungrily. With trembling hands, she unhooked her bra and let it fall to the floor. Then she unzipped her skirt and let it fall, and he came to her, clutching her, holding her, kissing her everywhere. They sank to the carpet as she worked at loosening his tie.

She was tumbling head first into something different, a new kind of passion she'd never known. Juicy, he'd called her. She felt juicy. Maybe it was true—maybe the girls who worked at the Key Lounge really *were* tramps. At the moment, she didn't care. At the moment, she wanted Luke Henderson and she was going to get him. A picture of Patty's sweet smile flashed through her mind, but then, she forgot all about Patty as Luke took her on a long, happy journey away from everything, and brought her back exhausted and totally happy.

"Now," he said, rolling over. "Now I can concentrate on what I want to say to you."

She stretched her arms above her head. "Umm," she said.

"Tina, it seems I'm always asking you to explain yourself. Why did you run out of the restaurant?"

She was too sleepy and too relaxed to start an argument about Patty. "I don't know," she said tiredly. "It was a sudden impulse. I knew Patty didn't want me around."

"Patty is not *in* this conversation. This

is between you and me, and I want to know what's going on in your head."

"Well, can you blame me? I'm confused. I don't know where I stand, with you or anyone else. Much as I care for you, I have no rights to you."

"Neither does Patty."

"Patty's not *in* this conversation."

"Tina, I'm not a piece of property. I don't belong to anyone."

"Then why did you let her lead you over to see that baby when you clearly did not want to go?"

"Because it seemed simpler to give in than to make a fuss over it. It didn't cost me anything to walk over and admire the baby."

"But don't you see what she was trying to do? She wants you to give her a baby like that."

"She's out of luck."

"But she's not getting that message from you. You're too nice to her, so she thinks you care."

"I hate to remind you, but part of this is your fault as much as mine. I didn't invite her to lunch, you did. If you hadn't done that, she would have seen me leaving the church with you."

He was right, of course. She had caused part of the trouble herself. "You're right. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it," he said, kissing her bare shoulder. "She's going to find out soon enough. There's a gathering at the church Wednesday night. I want you there—with me."

"What kind of a gathering?"

"It's a regular Wednesday night thing, a sort of a social hour."

"I don't know, Luke. They're not too pleased with me at work, always taking time off."

"Please say yes. It's important to me."

Facing those church people again was the last thing she wanted to do, but it seemed to be top priority to Luke. "All

right, just this once."

"Good. I've got to go now, but I'll pick you up here at six Wednesday night, all right?" Tina nodded. He looked at her and smiled. "You're so pretty with those round brown eyes. You're round everywhere, even your earrings. It's hard to leave you."

"Don't leave, then," she said, reaching for him, pulling him down to love her all over again.

She was ready when he came to pick her up on Wednesday night. "I don't know about this," she said, climbing into his car. "I'm really nervous."

He shut her door and went around to get in the driver's side. "There's no reason to be nervous."

"That's easy for you to say. They're all going to be thinking of me as the villain in this play."

"It's not a play, and let them think what they want. I want you with me."

She sighed and sat back. "All right. I'll do my best."

"Good girl," He drove directly to the church and parked in the lot, then took her hand and led her inside. It seemed to Tina the level of noise changed when they entered the room, as if everyone stopped talking to stare, but maybe it was all her imagination. She stayed at Luke's side, smiling at everyone, pretending to be happy to be there. He squeezed her hand.

"I'm going to introduce you to a friend of mind," he said, leading her over to an ancient little woman in a purple velvet dress. The woman was sitting down, sipping tea. "Charlotte, this is Tina, the girl I told you about."

Charlotte looked up and smiled a genuine greeting. "Sit down here, young woman, I want to get to know you." Tina sat, sensing a friend in Charlotte. She nodded to Luke that she would be all right if he needed to circulate, and he left them.

"Luke said you're something of a fireball," Charlotte said when Luke was out of hearing range.

"A fireball?"

"Or maybe he said a hell-cat. Whatever. It means you've got some spirit. Better than that pea-brain Patty. I never could tolerate that little goose, and I hated to see her tagging after Luke."

"She's awfully nice."

"Sure she is. That and a quarter will get you a cup of coffee. Luke doesn't need nice. He needs a real woman."

"Charlotte—may I call you Charlotte? Since you seem to be interested in Luke's welfare, I've got to tell you, I'm not right for him. Not at all. You see, I don't even belong to a church. Last Sunday was my first time in church in fifteen years."

"So what? A man spends more time in bed than in church."

Tina was embarrassed. Had Luke told Charlotte everything? "I appreciate your confidence in me," she said shyly. "But I really don't think this is going to work out. Except for you, I'm not comfortable with these people—and these people are part of Luke's life."

Charlotte shook her head, her gray hair in a loose bun at her neck. "You're not comfortable because you don't have any confidence in yourself. You need to get out there and hold your head up proud and don't let people scare you. You're as good as any and better than most."

Tina simply didn't believe it. "I don't feel that way."

"You'll never get anywhere if you don't try. Go on. Go out there and socialize. It'll get easier once you get started. Go on, now. You can do it."

Reluctantly, Tina got up. She wandered over to the refreshments table and picked up a styrofoam cup with coffee in it. "I'm Emily," the lady behind the table said. "Won't you have a cookie?"

"Thanks. I'm Tina."

Emily smiled, but it did not seem like a sincere smile. "I saw you come in with Reverend Henderson. Have you known him long?"

Emily seemed to be fishing for information. "Actually," Tina said, "I've only just met him. I'm here on a sort of exchange program. I'm an ordained minister from New Mexico, you see, and they've sent me back here to see how things are done. It's a very good program. It lets me meet so many different people."

"How interesting!" Emily said. "Imagine—a lady preacher. Do you have a big congregation, there in New Mexico?"

"Oh, not too big. I have a few Indians in the congregation. It's difficult for them, you know, giving up their ancient tribal ways to come to worship in a regular church. We try to maintain continuity, by making connections between Christianity and the Navajo ways." Tina looked down at the coffee in her hand. What a bunch of *bull*. Before this moment, she'd never given a thought to Navajos and their churches.

"This is really fascinating," Emily said. "I'd never really thought about the problems they might have."

"Well, we're living in a changing society and even the Navajos have to change, eventually, if they're going to survive."

"I'll bet you're part Navajo, aren't you. With those high cheekbones and dark eyes, I just bet you are!"

Tina laughed nervously. "Not many people notice, but yes, I'm one-fourth Navajo. I don't advertise it, though. We're all humans, under the skin."

"Of course that's true."

Tina smiled. "I'd better circulate a little bit." She edged away from the table.

"Nice meeting you," Emily called. Tina wanted to go back to Charlotte, or to seek out Luke, or to simply skip out the door. She stood, uncertainly looking around, until a large man came up, grab-

bed her hand and pumped it, and introduced himself as "Harv."

"Nice to meet you," Tina said hesitantly.

"You're a pretty little thing. Don't worry, I'm harmless. Are you from around here?"

"Not really." She wasn't about to tell him she worked at the Key Lounge. "I'm from New Orleans, actually."

"Ah, I thought so! Bet you have some Cajun blood. I could tell from looking at you." He paused and frowned. "But you don't have an accent."

"No, my parents sent me to some of the better schools so I learned to speak without an accent." Tina couldn't believe it. She was getting in deeper and deeper, each lie more outrageous than the last.

"New Orleans is a great place," Harv said. "The wife and I were there for Mardi Gras one time."

"Oh sure, it's wonderful. I never miss it." Just then Luke appeared at her side.

"I'm glad you're meeting people," he said approvingly.

"Nice to met you, Harv," Tina said, steering Luke quickly away from him. "He's a nice man. I met Emily, too, at the coffee table."

"They're all nice, when you get to know them."

"Especially Charlotte. I really like Charlotte."

"I knew you would. She's a fiesty old thing."

"But Luke—I've been good. Could I possibly go now?"

He frowned, but then reconsidered. "I guess maybe we've been here long enough. Let me say good-bye to a few people and then I'll take you home."

"Thank you. I'll say good-bye to Charlotte."

A few minutes later, they slipped out the door and into Luke's car. Tina immediately felt better. She sat back and

relaxed, comfortable in Luke's company. He drove her straight home and stopped the car, then reached over and ran his fingers through her curls.

"I'd better not come up," he said. "I'd only want to stay and I've got a busy day tomorrow."

"That's all right," she said, a little disappointed and a little relieved. She was tired. "I'll see you Saturday at the soup kitchen, won't I?"

He smiled. "I wouldn't miss it for the world. Give me a quick kiss and I'll walk you to your door."

The next few days passed quickly and Tina did not give any more thought to the stories she had told at the church. On Saturday, she dressed in jeans and walked down to the Catholic church, anxious to see Luke. He wasn't there, however. She waited, looking up expectantly whenever anyone came through the door, but he didn't come.

When all the soup was ladled, she took her own bowl and sought out Father O'Malley. "I was wondering, Father, is Luke—is Reverend Henderson going to be here tonight?"

"Oh—Reverend Henderson, no, he called and cancelled. Something came up, I guess. Anything I can help you with?"

"No, thank you, Father."

The evening lost its sparkle. She stayed and helped clean up the dishes, then walked home, depressed and missing Luke. She wondered what had come up to make him miss their date, which he had said he wouldn't miss for the world. She hoped Patty hadn't got hold of him again.

She didn't hear from him the next week, nor was he at the soup kitchen the following Saturday. Tina finally admitted to herself something was wrong. She didn't know what to do. She didn't know if he was angry or ill or if he'd simply had a change of heart. If he didn't want to see

her anymore, she didn't want to call and make a pest of herself.

She was still confused a few days later when she unexpectedly ran into Patty in the shopping mall. Patty's greeting was *not* friendly.

"I found out you're not Luke's cousin," she said accusingly. "Everybody's talking about all the lies you told. Luke's really embarrassed."

"Oh," Tina said, looking down. So that was why she hadn't heard from him. She should have known.

"I found out a *lot* about you," Patty continued. "I don't appreciate you trying to take Luke away from me."

Tina looked up. "If he's getting away from you, it's not my fault. You never had him in the first place."

"I did. We were almost engaged."

"That's not what he says."

Patty was growing visibly angry and losing control of her sweet temper. "You're nothing but a *cocktail* waitress."

Tina was not that pleased with her job, but she was not going to admit it to Patty. "So what? You don't even have a job."

"If I did work, I certainly wouldn't lower myself to work in a place like the Key Lounge."

"Oh yeah?" Tina realized she was engaged in a ridiculous conversation. She hadn't heard from Luke, and she knew how he felt about Patty. The truth was, he didn't want either one of them.

"You want to fight me for him?" Tina asked impulsively.

"What do you mean, fight you for him?"

"A contest. Wrestling. At the church."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"All right." Tina turned and started to walk away.

"Wait!" Patty called. Tina paused and turned. "If we had such a contest—I know it's a silly idea, but if we did, and if I won, would you go away and leave Luke

alone?"

"Sure, fair is fair. But you have to realize that winning wouldn't guarantee a thing. Luke will do what he wants."

"I know, but ever since you've been around, he's been different. I think if you were out of the picture I could get him back."

Tina didn't say she was already out of the picture. "Do you really think you could beat me in a wrestling match?"

"Maybe. I'm taller than you and I weigh more."

"All right," Tina said. "You think about it. My number's in the phone book, Tina Fowler. If you want to do it, set up a wrestling match, two falls out of three." She turned and left Patty standing there. She knew Patty had far too much dignity to fight her in public for Luke's affections. It was just another one of those silly ideas that kept popping into her head. She went home, pleased with the new shoes she had bought at the mall.

The next day, Patty called her. "It's all set up," Patty said.

"What's all set up?"

"The wrestling match. At the church, Sunday, after the service."

"You're joking."

"I thought about it," Patty said. "I think wrestling is an acceptable way to settle things. In the Bible, Jacob wrestled with an angel."

Tina wished she'd never thought up the idea. "Does Luke know about this?" she asked.

"No, he doesn't. I saw no reason to worry him about it. It's between you and me. You'll be there, won't you? You won't chicken out?"

Tina didn't say anything. She couldn't imagine Patty had taken her seriously about wrestling. But she also couldn't chicken out as Patty said. "I'll be there."

Sunday morning, Tina got up early.

After breakfast and tidying up her apartment, she put on red tights and a red leotard, and then a blue corduroy jumper over the top. She could remove the jumper after church and be all set for the match, which she didn't believe would take place anyway. Luke wouldn't allow it when he found out about it. But Tina had to be there to show Patty she wasn't afraid of the challenge.

She got to church on time and took her place as the church service began. She saw Luke's astonishment when he recognized her in the crowd of faces. Aside from astonishment, she could not read his face. He might have been sad, glad, or indifferent to see her.

She fidgeted during the service, unable to concentrate, worrying constantly about what might happen. The more she thought about it, the more ridiculous the wrestling match seemed. Perhaps Luke would be so angry about it that he would never speak to her again.

On the other hand, he wasn't speaking to her now.

When the service was over, she wandered down to the church basement, her heart beating with anxiety and confusion. There was a large wrestling mat laid out on the floor. Conversation was much more lively than usual, and Tina realized the proposed match had created a circus atmosphere.

As she wandered through the crowd, Charlotte saw her and hurried over to give her a big hug. Charlotte wore her purple velvet again, and she smelled of inexpensive perfume, but Tina was grateful for a friend.

"This is a splendid idea," Charlotte said, cackling. "You're going to beat the socks off her!"

"Oh, I don't think so. Charlotte, they're not going to go through with this, are they?"

"You bet they are! This is the most in-

teresting thing to happen in this church since Fred divorced Emma in 1967. Everyone's tickled pink!"

"But Luke..."

"Doesn't know and doesn't need to know. The church belongs to the people and not to him."

Tina was filled with doubts. "They'll all be rooting for Patty, if I fight her."

"Not all of them. Not everybody loves sweetness and light."

"Oh, Charlotte, this is stupid. I never-in-a-million-years-thought Patty would actually want to fight with me."

Charlotte was not at all concerned. "You can't back down now. Don't worry. You'll beat her."

"I'm not worried about winning or losing, I'm worried about making a fool of myself. I feel like a Christian being thrown to the lions—by other Christians. I don't think it's dignified. To fight over a man, I mean."

"Honey," Charlotte said, "dignity gets lost in the real world. Go out there and fight your heart out."

Tina sat down, trying to believe everything Charlotte had told her. In a few minutes, Patty appeared in a white leotard. She looked very pretty, Tina thought, with her long blond hair—a delicate, pretty girl despite her height. Tina slipped out of her coat and unbuttoned the straps on her jumper. The room grew suddenly quiet. Tina turned. Luke had arrived.

He smiled, but he was clearly confused by the presence of the wrestling mat. "What's this?" he asked.

"It's a little contest we've worked up," Charlotte said, taking his arm and leading him aside. "You should find it very interesting." Some of the other people laughed. Tina was glad everyone was getting such a charge out of this, when she herself was beginning to feel humiliated. Patty was self-assured as always. Tina

kept thinking Patty would back out, but then Patty stepped onto the mat and began doing deep knee bends to warm up.

Tina wanted to crawl into the nearest closet, but Charlotte stepped to the center of the mat and blew a whistle. People were laughing and joking and having a wonderful time.

"Let me have your attention!" Charlotte demanded, and the noise level dropped. "That's better. The main event today will be a closely contested match between Patty 'The Crusher' McIlroy..." Some of the people cheered and Patty raised her fist in a salute to her supporters. "And Tina 'Mad Dog' Fowler." Tina got some cheers, too, but she felt too embarrassed to acknowledge them.

"Just a minute," Luke's voice thundered. "What's going on here?"

"You just hush and watch," Charlotte said firmly, taking his arm. "This is between Mad Dog and The Crusher. The rest of us have to stay out of it."

"I can't allow this sort of thing," Luke insisted. "What do they hope to accomplish?"

"They're going to settle their differences, of course. It's a perfectly fair contest, and perfectly acceptable. Now back off and shut up."

Luke was so stunned he didn't know what to do. He allowed Charlotte to lead him back away from the mat, looking questioningly at the people who were clearly eager to see the match.

The woman Emily, whom Tina had met before at the coffee table, came forward and took Tina's coat and jumper. "Get on out there," Emily said, giving Tina a little push. "I've got a dollar riding on you."

Great, Tina thought. Now we've got *gambling* involved. "Have you called Jimmy the Greek?" Tina asked.

"Couldn't get through," Emily said. "Go get her now."

Tina took a tentative step onto the mat. Patty faced her, hands on her hips, dead-ly serious.

"All right, ladies," Charlotte said. "keep it clean. No hair-pulling and no biting. The contest is two falls out of three and to the winner go the spoils." She turned to Luke, standing in the crowd. "No offense, Luke, calling you the spoils." Everyone laughed except Luke.

"I'm the referee," Charlotte continued. "You'll begin when I blow my whistle. The loser of the match agrees to bow out gracefully in the contest for Reverend Henderson's affections. Is that agreeable to both of you?"

"Now wait a minute," Luke said, stepping forward, but someone took his arm and pulled him back.

"It's agreeable to me," Patty said.

"I guess," Tina said.

"All right, ladies, shake hands and get ready."

Tina shook Patty's hand, surprised to find Patty's grip firm. They backed off from each other and then Charlotte blew her whistle.

Tina just stood there. Patty had gone into a wrestler's crouch and was maneuvering in Tina's direction. "Patty's got nice form," someone said.

"Her brother wrestled in high school," someone else said. "She probably got it from him."

Tina took a step backward and Charlotte blew her whistle. "Stay on the mat!" she warned.

Patty came forward, then, grabbing Tina's arms, trying to throw her off balance. Something deep within Tina told her to fight back, not to fold.

She set her muscles and pushed back, forcing Patty back toward the center of the mat. The crowd cheered. They struggled there, each trying to gain an advantage over the other. Tina kicked out and locked one leg around Patty's leg, pulling

the taller girl off balance. They both went down in a heap.

"Doesn't count!" Charlotte declared. "Get up and get fighting."

Tina made another lunge at Patty. The movement was quick and unexpected and Patty went down flat on her back, twisting her ankle as she fell. She sat up and rubbed the ankle. Tina immediately dropped down next to her. "I'm sorry," Tina said sincerely. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"This has gone far enough," Luke said. "We don't want somebody hurt."

"It's not serious, Luke," someone said. "Calm down. It's up to Patty whether she wants to go on."

Patty's mother was on the mat consulting with her daughter. After a moment, Patty got up carefully, looking daggers at Tina.

Charlotte blew her whistle. "First fall goes to Mad Dog Fowler." She blew the whistle a second time. "Go for it, girls."

Patty was on guard now, and angry at losing the first fall. "I don't know who you think you are," Patty said quietly. "You're nothing but a cocktail waitress at the worst place in town. Everyone knows all about you."

"Is this a wrestling match or a name-calling match?" Tina asked, circling warily.

"Yeah, Patty," someone said, "keep it clean."

Patty was genuinely angry. Tina saw unspoken words form on Patty's lips. This was turning unexpectedly nasty. In confusion, Tina turned to look for Luke. As her attention was distracted, Patty lunged in and brought Tina down. They were tied.

From her spot sitting on the mat, Tina sought Luke. He was staring at her, still confused and shocked. She could see no affection there, none at all.

She looked up at Patty. "I concede,"

she said.

"You can't concede. I want to beat you fair and square. Get up."

Tina got up tiredly. "This is silly. Luke doesn't care about this."

"Maybe not, but I do," Patty said, circling in her wrestler's crouch. "I want everyone to know what kind of person you are."

Tina blinked, trying to stay out of Patty's reach. "I think you're showing what kind of person *you* are."

"You work at the Key Lounge," Patty said, making it an accusation.

"So what if I work at the Key Lounge?"

"Well, at least you're admitting it now," Patty said in a nasty tone. "You must have had something to hide before since you were making up all those outrageous *lies*."

Patty was absolutely right. Tina stepped back off the mat and held up her hands. Charlotte blew her whistle.

"I did make up some stories," Tina said. She turned to the watching crowd.

"I apologize to all of you. I made up stories because I wanted you to like me. I shouldn't have done it. I'm sorry." She paused, feeling tears threaten. "I *do* work at the Key Lounge, and I am a cocktail waitress. But it's not my fault the place has a bad reputation or that the girls who work there have a bad reputation. It's an honest job and I'm not going to be ashamed of it anymore."

She found Emily in the crowd and claimed her coat and jumper and shoes. Then, with all the dignity she had lost and found again, she walked up the stairs and out of the church basement.

She didn't let herself cry until she got home. There was no reason to cry, really. She had won a victory—over herself and her own foolishness. But she had lost Luke.

She realized finally that she had lost

him not this day, but a long time ago. He had been upset when she'd lied to Mrs. Wilson, clear back on the first day. And then she had lied to Patty and then to all the others, lie after lie.

It was no wonder he hadn't called her. No one wanted to hang around with a habitual liar. She cried for quite awhile until she finally cried herself to sleep.

She didn't know how long she slept when something woke her. She rolled over and looked at the clock. Four-thirty in the afternoon. Then she heard the knock on the door. Groggily she got to her feet, rubbing her eyes. She heard him before she got to the door. "Tina? It's Luke. Let me in."

She hadn't expected him. She truly hadn't expected to ever see him again. She opened the door and backed off, still sleepy. "You've been crying," he said.

"I've been sleeping." She looked up at his kind, dark eyes. "And crying."

"They tell me the wrestling match was your idea."

She moved toward her kitchen and turned on the fire under her tea kettle. "It was, but I was only joking when I brought it up. I had absolutely no idea Patty would take me up on it." She turned and looked at him again. "I'm sorry, Luke. I know it must have been embarrassing for you."

"Yes and no," he said, coming closer. "I'd never admit it to anyone else, Tina, but deep down inside I was flattered to have two attractive women fighting over me."

Tina smiled. "Really?"

"Of course. It was like pulling everything down to a primitive level and it helped me get back in touch with my own primitive feelings which I had been ignoring for some time."

Tina put two teabags in two cups. "I was wrong, though," she said. "I was wrong to make up those stories."

"True enough. You were trying to

make yourself into something you're not."

She looked up at him through her long lashes. "Is that why you didn't call me for so long?"

"I wanted to call you. But I felt you needed time to sort things out on your own. I didn't want to *tell* you what to do, I wanted you to figure it out on your own. I wanted you to realize, on your own, that you don't need to make up stories. Because you're beautiful and wonderful just the way you are."

"Nah." She turned away and picked up the tea kettle, which had just begun to whistle.

He waited until she set it down, then came and put his arms around her. "Yes."

"Oh, I don't know, Luke. I still don't feel like I belong in your world. I'll never feel comfortable with Patty around, never in a million years."

"I know," he said, hugging her close. "My assignment here in Redmond is only temporary. I'm being transferred next month. I want you to come with me, as my wife."

She looked up, startled by his words. "A fresh start," she said, thinking out loud. "In a congregation that knows nothing about the Key Lounge or about wrestling matches."

"That's right."

"But what about Patty?"

"What about her? I don't believe she ever cared for me. She cared for the fact I was a minister. Chances are my replacement will be another single man and she'll have another chance."

Tina nodded. "Say that again, what you said before. The wife part."

"I want you to come with me. As my wife."

"Yeah, that's the part. I like that. Would you say it just one more time?"

"I want you to come with me. As my wife." ♥



Surprised By Love

Accountant Cathryn Bracken has grown used to hiding her anguish behind a facade of pleasant smiles and hard work. So has her devastatingly handsome client, Joshua Hunt. Will the attraction between them prove stronger than the secrets that keep them apart?

JASMINE CRAIG

Cathryn pushed herself away from the desk. Her body ached from too many hours spent poring over financial data sheets, but her mind remained infuriatingly active.

Sometimes, if she worked really late at the client's office, she was able to fall asleep as soon as her head touched the pillow. More often, though, the memories of Robert would crowd in, making sleep impossible. She realized this was going to

be another one of those nights.

She was putting away the last of the files when she became aware that someone was watching her. She swung around quickly, made nervous by the isolation of the corner office she had been working in.

Biting off a scream, she swallowed hard when she saw the tall man standing in the doorway. He was blond, blue eyed, and darkly tanned, wearing faded jeans and a thick knit sweater that clung to the

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powerful muscles of his shoulders.

"Who are you?" he asked, his voice cool but polite. "What are you doing here so late?"

"I'm Cathryn Bracken, and I work for the accounting firm of Kingston and Arthur. I'm one of the auditors assigned to certify Consolidated Vision's annual accounts."

His sudden grin added warmth to his dark blue eyes. "That sounds very believable. Even from the rear view you look more like an accountant than a burglar. There's something so aggressively respectable about gray pinstripes." He held out his hand. "I'm Joshua Hunt."

She shook his hand briefly, concealing a tiny start of surprise as she recognized the name of Consolidated Vision's president. "As you can see, I was just leaving, Mr. Hunt. My partner and I would be happy to discuss the progress of our work with you tomorrow, if you can spare the time."

He narrowed his eyes, and something in the way he looked at her caused a wave of heat to burn in her cheeks. "Why are you working so late?" he asked. "Have you come across a problem?"

"No. But this is a busy time of year for accountants, and I need to finish up here as quickly as I can." She smiled an impersonal smile.

He ignored the smile. "Have you eaten dinner yet?"

"No. I was planning to grab a sandwich in the motel coffee shop."

"I just flew in from London, and I always try to avoid eating on planes if I can. Will you wait while I pick up some urgent mail and then have dinner with me?"

She hesitated. Then, reminding herself he was a client, she said, "Thank you. I'd like that. While you're going through your mail, I'll freshen up."

When she went into the ladies' room

and unpinned her thick brown hair, she was surprised to find that her hands were shaking. She formed a soft, smooth coil at the nape of her neck, then brushed brown shadow into the crease of her eyelid, to match her big brown eyes. There was no reason for her to be on edge, she told herself. She had accepted several dinner invitations from attractive men in the year since Robert had died.

One of the first bitter lessons she had learned after they carried Robert's limp body out of the ocean was that grieving young widows attract male attention the way open pots of jam attract flies. But most men, she had discovered, weren't especially perceptive. If you laughed at their jokes and allowed them to kiss you good night, they rarely noticed that your emotional response hovered at zero. She had found that the more superficially outgoing she appeared, the less likely most men were to offer her consolation for widowhood in the warmth of their beds.

Not that she had any reason to suppose that Joshua Hunt had a personal interest in her. His invitation was probably no more than a courtesy extended to a business associate.

When she came out of the ladies' room, he was waiting. "There's a place called Hank's Hamburger Heaven a couple of blocks from here," he said. "Let's walk there. I guarantee it sells the best hamburgers in Connecticut. Like to try it?"

"With a recommendation like that, how could I resist?"

"How long have you been working for Kingston and Arthur?" he asked as they strolled toward the restaurant.

"Almost a year now."

"I noticed your wedding ring; it's a very unusual design. How do you and your husband cope with the demands of a two-career marriage?"

"I'm a widow," she said. In the long run, it always proved quicker and less

painful to tell the story willingly, so that her escort's protective instincts weren't aroused. "My husband was killed in a scuba-diving accident in the Caribbean. He's been dead for almost eighteen months now." She didn't add that he had died on their honeymoon. She also didn't add that she had had a miscarriage when she was three months pregnant and that her life had effectively stopped at that moment.

"I'm very sorry," he said, a note of real gentleness in his voice.

She spoke again forcing herself to mouth the lies that would stop his questions. "It was dreadful at first, but I guess I'm over the worst of it now." She searched for a suitable platitude. "Time helps," she said. "And so does my profession."

"Is that why you were working late tonight?"

She resented his question. "Oh, no," she lied. "I told you, our firm is very busy right now." She forced her lips to curve into a relaxed smile. "You mentioned that you've just come back from London. Was it a business trip, Mr. Hunt, or were you lucky enough to find time for an early summer vacation?"

"It was a business trip, and please call me Joshua," he said as they entered the restaurant. "I want Consolidated Vision to start making movies geared to the cable TV market, and I was hoping to get some financial backing in London."

Cathryn breathed a quiet sigh of relief as a hostess led them to a table. With any luck she would be able to keep the conversation strictly on his business plans. She should be back in her motel room within an hour and then—at last—she could let herself drown in bittersweet memories.

She had scarcely finished reading the menu when a waitress came and took their order. Joshua added a request for a carafe of red wine.

"They only serve three varieties of wine

here," he said with a grin. "Red, white, and pink. I've had the red before, and it's not too bad."

"Don't worry, I'm anything but a connoisseur. Robert tried hard to teach me, but I always ended up liking sweet white wines and spurning his favorite cabernets and burgundies. I remember he ordered a bottle of Dom Perignon for our wedding night, but the bubbles gave me hiccups before I finished my first glass!"

Her voice died away, and she looked up, appalled at the personal details she had unwittingly revealed. Joshua was examining her with an intense, speculative expression. "Your husband's name was Robert?" he said.

"Yes." Her answer was more curt than she intended it to be, but she had never before allowed anyone to share the precious secrets of her brief married life.

"Here comes our food," Joshua said, apparently unaware of her tension.

Cathryn waited until they had both taken a few hungry bites before determinedly bringing the conversation into the channels she wanted it to follow. "I understand your father founded your company thirty years ago, when he was fresh out of college. Now you own seven radio stations and three cable television franchises?" she asked.

"Yes, we've expanded rapidly over the past ten years."

"Has your father retired from active control of the company?"

There was an infinitesimal pause. "No. Actually, my father is chairman of the board and very active in company affairs. He's only in his late fifties."

"And your mother?"

"She died when I was a teenager."

"I'm sorry."

"It was bad at the time but, as you said, time heals."

Something in his voice made her look up from her spinach salad, but she decid-

ed she must have imagined hearing a faint trace of sarcasm. "My father married again last year," he said. "My stepmother is a charming woman."

Again she wondered if she had imagined the peculiar undercurrent that shadowed his words. She finished her salad and sipped her wine, suddenly realizing that she was tired to the point of total exhaustion.

"Where are you staying?" Joshua asked as he called for the waitress and paid the bill. "At the Old Colonial Motel?"

"Yes. Speaking of which, I'd better get back there soon. I have to make an early start tomorrow morning."

"The motel is three blocks from here," he said. "Would you like me to walk you home?"

"I can call a cab. I don't want to take you out of your way."

"No problem."

As they walked out into the night, the air felt cool after the pleasant mugginess of the restaurant.

"I'm sure you must be tired after your trip," Cathryn said. "Why don't I call a cab so that you can go straight home?"

"I'd prefer to walk. My father's home is quite close to the motel. You're not taking me out of my way."

"You live with your father?"

"Yes." He must have heard the slight surprise in her question, for he lifted his shoulders in a tiny shrug. "Consolidated has radio stations all over the Midwest, so I travel a great deal. Until my father remarried, it seemed silly to keep up two bachelor households. But recently, I've been thinking I ought to have a place of my own."

It wasn't difficult to interpret a great deal that he had left unspoken. Obviously his stepmother—his "charming" stepmother—was difficult to live with. Cathryn, however, was not interested in Joshua Hunt's personal problems. As far

as she was concerned, a great deal too much personal information had been exchanged.

When they came to Cathryn's door she gave him another impersonal smile. "Well, good night, Joshua. Thanks for the escort service. I'm *really* glad we happened to meet in your office," she added warmly. She had found there were few things as effective as brisk professional enthusiasm for putting an end to unwanted intimacy. "It's always a pleasure to meet the president of the company I'm working with."

His blue eyes darkened with amusement. "Very prettily spoken," he murmured. "I'm sure your colleagues give you top marks for client relations."

"Well, good night again," she said, hastily fitting her key into the lock and keeping her face averted. "Perhaps I'll see you some time during the week."

"Maybe. Although I'll be busy."

Even though she wasn't looking at him, she heard the hesitation in his voice and was humiliated. She quickly pushed open the door and was startled when he reached out to restrain her.

For several seconds neither of them moved, then Joshua slowly twisted her around until they were face to face. Their eyes locked, and Cathryn swayed toward him, unable to control the reflex action of her body.

"Oh, hell!" he muttered as he bent toward her mouth. "I didn't mean to do this, not now."

His kiss was hard, passionate, and demanding in its urgency. Cathryn's mind whirled in confusion at the realization that she didn't want this kiss to end.

The sound of people gradually approaching along the corridor penetrated the haze enveloping her brain, and she suddenly realized precisely what she was doing. She was standing outside a motel room kissing a man who—a man who

wasn't Robert.

"Stop!" she said. "For God's sake, stop!" She jerked herself out of his arms. "Somebody's coming."

At that moment, a middle-aged couple appeared and halted outside a room a couple of doors away.

Cathryn had a momentary impression that Joshua's eyes were blank with shock. But when the chattering couple disappeared into their room and she turned to look at him more closely, his eyes glittered with nothing more than a trace of unfulfilled desire, laced with rueful humor.

"I must be losing my touch," he said. "Your bedroom door was wide open, and I was kissing you out here in the corridor. It's years since I was so gauche."

She managed to keep her smile very cool. "You assume too much, Joshua. It's not easy to get an invitation into my room."

The smile faded from his eyes. "No, I'm sure it's not," he said. He turned away, his movement abrupt. "Good night, Cathryn. I guess I'll see you around."

When she walked into the Consolidated Vision office the next morning, Cathryn still hadn't decided how she was going to behave toward Joshua Hunt. Her worries proved unnecessary, however, because Joshua never attempted to speak to her alone. She didn't have to cope with finding a graceful way to refuse his invitations, because he offered her none. She convinced herself that she wouldn't have gone anywhere with Joshua even if he had asked.

It was almost six o'clock on Thursday evening when her partner, Jim, signed the final page of their audit. "Thank heaven we're finally done," he said, pulling on his jacket and reaching into a cabinet to retrieve his suitcase. "I checked out of the motel this morning, and I'm going to try for the seven-fifteen train back to town.

My wife's been complaining that she sees more of the man who delivers the dry cleaning than she does of me. Are you going back to Manhattan tonight?"

"No. I'm planning to stay here until tomorrow morning. But you'd better run, Jim, if you're going to catch the seven-fifteen. Don't worry, I'll make sure everything's squared away in the office before I leave."

"Thanks, Cathryn," he said, dashing for the door. "I hope we'll work together again soon."

It took almost half an hour to clear out their office. When she was sure that everything was stowed away, she put on her linen jacket, wondering suddenly if Joshua Hunt was still in the building. If he was, it would be good business practice to let him know that the audit was satisfactorily complete. If he wasn't there, she would leave a polite note on his desk saying that their official report would be mailed to him next week.

The door to Joshua's outer office was open, and his lamp was on. She tapped lightly on the maple panels and stepped inside quickly, before she could change her mind.

He was sitting at his desk, surrounded by several intimidating mounds of paper. He looked desperately unhappy, with grim lines of concentration etched into his forehead. She was astonished by the wave of sympathy that swept through her when he looked up.

He blinked. "Cathryn! I didn't hear you come in."

"I did knock," she said, "but you were concentrating hard. You look tired, Joshua," she added.

"I guess I am, but I can't leave yet." There was weariness in his smile. "It seems as if I have at least a month's paper-work to catch up on."

"Every one of those documents will still be on your desk tomorrow morning,"

she said softly. "It's late. Isn't it time you called a halt for the day?"

"To be honest, I'm looking for an excuse to quit," he said. "Have you come to invite me out to dinner?"

"No!" Her denial was too vehement, breaking the light mood between them. She swallowed hard, then managed to smile casually. "In fact, I really only came to say good-bye. Jim and I have finished the audit, and we'll be sending you our official report next week."

Her self-confidence increasing, she walked over to his desk, holding out her hand. "It's been a pleasure working here," she said crisply.

He said nothing. Standing up, he took her outstretched hand in his firm grasp. Cathryn felt an irrational quiver of fear and hastily snatched back her hand.

"I'll be writing to you next week," she repeated, conquering her momentary breathlessness. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Cathryn."

She was almost out the door when he spoke again. "Don't go!"

She paused on the threshold.

"I'm going to spend the weekend at a place called Hampton Creek," he said. "My father owns a cottage right on the beach, and he's not using it this weekend. Would you like to come up there with me?"

She had the instantaneous and uneasy feeling that his invitation was not as casually offered as it seemed. She opened her mouth to refuse him, but the polite words of refusal didn't come out.

"I'd love to spend some time out of the city," she was astonished to hear herself say. "But there's no way I could get up there unless I flew to Newport."

"No need for you to do that. I'll drive into New York on Friday evening and pick you up myself," Joshua said.

As Cathryn wrote down her address, Joshua's eyes studied her with candid in-

terest.

"Great," he said as she handed him the paper. "I'll see you around seven."

Before she was back at the motel, Cathryn already regretted the crazy impulse that had caused her to accept Joshua's invitation. What was she going to do if she found herself alone in an isolated cottage with a man she scarcely knew and then had to spend all weekend fighting off his attempts to force her into his bed?

First thing on Friday morning, she telephoned Joshua's office, determined to cancel the date. She reached his secretary, who said Mr. Hunt was in a meeting, could she take a message?

Cathryn was silent for a long time. "No message," she said finally. She wondered if she would actually have cancelled their date even if she had managed to reach Joshua.



She was ready at the agreed-upon time that evening, waiting in the lobby. She had dressed in an old pair of jeans and a simple cotton shirt, her long hair tied back in a careless ponytail, in the hope that by making herself look outwardly casual and unconcerned, she could make her inner feelings follow suit.

Joshua drew up to the curb. He was wearing jeans more faded than her own and a faded shirt. He made no comment on their similar choice of clothing. In fact, he scarcely glanced at her. He greeted her with perfect politeness and congratulated her teasingly on being punctual.

Similar light, polite conversation lasted the entire journey. Joshua was a model host. He pointed out places of interest, commented on the favorable weather forecast, and generally made himself thoroughly agreeable.

When they arrived at the cottage, Cathryn saw it was attractive, fairly small, but luxuriously equipped. On the ground

floor there was a modern kitchen and a comfortable living room. Upstairs were two bedrooms, each furnished with a queen-size bed. In one bedroom the bedspread and drapes were bright yellow. In the other, they were bright green.

Cathryn was impressed and said so.

"My stepmother did all the decorating," Joshua told her. He turned away, making a halfhearted effort to smother a yawn. "You know, that bed looks very inviting," he said, dropping his small overnight bag onto the bright green spread. "Would you mind if we called it a night?"

"I wouldn't mind at all." She picked up her small suitcase and walked toward the door, smiling brightly. "Good night, Joshua. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

He returned her smile with one equally as bright. "Sleep well, Cathryn."

Her smile faded as soon as she was out of his sight, but she had taken a shower and was stretching out across the fresh sheets of the big yellow bed before she realized what was bothering her. Joshua was an attractive virile man and yet he hadn't even suggested that she might want to share his bed. What was wrong with her? At twenty-seven, had she begun to look old and faded, no longer attractive to men?



When she woke up the next morning, she realized that for the first time in eighteen months she had fallen asleep without thinking of Robert. She wasn't sure whether to be glad or sorry.

When she came downstairs, Joshua had already prepared a simple breakfast of coffee and cereal. The sun was shining, the coffee smelled wonderful, and Cathryn suddenly felt sure that the weekend would be fun.

The pleasant indolence she felt was fiercely jolted when Joshua suggested they go sailing. She swallowed hard. She

hadn't been sailing since her last fatal excursion with Robert. Rationally, however, she knew it was time she laid her lingering fear of the ocean to rest.

"Cathryn?" Joshua repeated, obviously mystified by her long silence. "Is there some problem? You mentioned on the ride yesterday that you'd learned to sail as a teenager. I thought you'd like to take the boat out, but we don't have to go if you'd prefer to do something else."

With a phenomenal effort of will she thrust the images of the treacherous blue Caribbean out of her mind.

"Yes, I'd like to come with you," she said, wondering if he heard the tremble in her voice.

The marina where he kept the boat was less than two miles away, and to Cathryn's mind, they arrived there far too soon. Her stomach knotted with fear as she stepped onto the deck. For the first few minutes, she responded to Joshua's orders in a state of almost catatonic numbness. To her surprise, however, she found that her old skills soon returned, and in her effort to appear unafraid, she discovered that the worst of her fear had truly vanished.

She could see that Joshua was an experienced sailor, and her needle-sharp tension dissipated further. They sailed out of the harbor into the open sea with the cool wind blowing steadily at their backs.

Cathryn leaned back against the side of the boat. She closed her eyes and felt the sun's warm rays on her face. She began to think that perhaps—at last—she was overcoming the fear of the ocean that had haunted her for the past year and a half.

She had no idea how long she sat there, her eyes closed, lost in bittersweet memories. Suddenly she looked up at the sky and saw that the sun had disappeared behind an ominous silvery-black cloud. A strong, puffy wind had picked up.

Joshua turned to her. "Take the tiller," he said. "Head up into the wind."

I'm going to drop the mainsail."

She managed to take the three steps necessary to change places with Joshua at the helm. He held out a life jacket. "Put it on," he said.

She accepted the jacket, but couldn't remember how to put it on. She let the jacket slide to the deck, her last conscious action before her brain and body froze with panic. She clutched the tiller, heaving it desperately from side to side in reaction to every sway of the boat.

"Leave the tiller free, for God's sake!" Joshua yelled. "Dammit, Cathy, are you trying to capsize us?"

She scarcely heard him. She no longer saw the gray Atlantic. Instead, the brilliant blue of the Caribbean appeared in front of her eyes.

"No! I won't let him be hurt! Oh, my God! Robert!"

She had forgotten all about Joshua Hunt, but he must have heard her anguished words, for he suddenly shouted her name. She looked up, blinking her eyes rapidly, as he grabbed her arms, forcibly loosening them from the tiller.

"I'll take that. Go check the pump," he ordered tersely.

She went below, following his order numbly. She saw that the pump was operating efficiently, then realized that she had sloshed through a couple of inches of water in order to reach it. She found a mop and began to clean up the cabin's soaking wet carpets. She worked for a long while, barely aware of what she was doing. Her shoulders were aching from the effort when Joshua appeared and took the mop from her hand and rested it in the pail. He put his hands around her waist, gently pulling her toward him.

For a long time he held her in his arms, not saying anything. Then he cupped her face in his hands.

"The sun's shining again," he said. "The storm's over."

"Yes." She gave a tiny gasp. "Yes, I can see it is."

"Please tell me what happened to you, Cathy. You seemed to be paralyzed with fear."

His hands were warm against her chilled skin. When she suddenly started shaking, he took off his life jacket and encircled her in his embrace, and gradually her convulsive shuddering ended.

He waited until she was completely still in his arms, then he put his forefinger under her chin and tilted up her face. "Tell me how Robert died," he said softly.

She looked into his eyes. "No," she cried. "No, I don't want to remember!"

He held her close. "You may not want to remember, but you can't forget," he said. "Tell me what happened, Cathy. It will help, I promise."

For the first time since Robert's death, she allowed herself to express all the hurt and fury she had tried to keep hidden deep inside her soul.

"It was the last day of our honeymoon," she said. "We went sailing. Robert had done some scuba diving when he was a teenager, so he was fairly experienced. I wasn't, so he made his dive with a local man he'd met at the hotel. A storm came up—it hadn't been forecast. The anchor didn't hold the boat. The investigators said afterward that the chain was faulty and broke. While I was trying to get the boat under control, Robert was stung by a Portuguese man o'war. He didn't know it, but he was allergic to its venom."

She licked her lips. They tasted salty. She touched her cheeks and was amazed to find that she was crying. "I never cry," she said.

Joshua traced the path of a tear down her cheek, but he didn't contradict her.

"Cathy, what happened after the man o'war attacked Robert?"

"He went into an immediate convulsive reaction and he couldn't breathe properly. The other diver brought him to the surface, but they were forty feet under and they had to surface slowly. The other guy wasn't that strong a swimmer, and the storm had driven the boat a long way from where they were diving." Her voice faded. "Robert was dead by the time they reached me."

"What difference would it have made if the boat had been closer, Cathy?"

"None at all!" Angrily, she jerked herself out of his grasp. "It wouldn't have made any difference if I could have kept the boat at anchor. The doctor said it would have made no difference at all!"

He pulled her back into his arms. "Then why are you so angry with yourself?" he demanded.

She felt her face contort into an agonized, uncontrollable grimace of grief. "It *would* have changed things," she whispered. "It's my fault he died."

Joshua's eyes darkened slightly. "Why is it your fault?"

She couldn't meet his eyes. She didn't want to look at him when she finally admitted the dark secret she had kept hidden, even from her mother. "There was a fully stocked first-aid kit on board. If I'd kept the boat where it should have been, we could have given Robert a shot of adrenaline. It would probably have saved his life. But I couldn't control the boat. After all those years of sailing, I couldn't even keep it close to where he was diving."

He cupped her face in his hands and pulled her head around so that she was forced to meet his eyes. "Cathy, after all those years of sailing, you know there was nothing you could have done. A tropical storm blew up, and your anchor chain broke. That's an act of fate, not

something you have to blame yourself for. Dammit, Cathy, there are some accidents you can't guard against if you're ever going to get out of bed in the morning."

She felt her tears stream freely down her cheeks. "Why did he have to die, Joshua? We loved each other so much.

We were so good together."

"It's OK." Joshua squeezed her tight. She sighed, aware of an inner peacefulness that had long eluded her.

Neither of them spoke for several minutes, then Joshua held her at arm's length. "Hey, did you hear that noise?" he asked.

She blinked. "No. What noise?"

"My stomach growling. How could you have missed it."

She was astonished to feel her mouth curve into a smile. "I guess my mind was on higher things."

"Lady, there is absolutely *nothing* higher than a man's stomach."

She laughed. Unbelievably, she laughed. She punched Joshua lightly, then moved out of his arms and sat down near the prow. "Is there anything good to eat in that cooler?"

"Sure is. You can rely on me, ma'am, to provide a gourmet feast." He lifted the lid with a flourish. "Two ham sandwiches. A package of potato chips and a box of pretzels. Not to mention a bunch of grapes and four cans of beer."

"Potato chips *and* pretzels?" she murmured. "I see you believe in peak nutrition as well as gourmet food."

"I will ignore that snide comment," he said, sitting down beside her. He placed the food carefully between them, then leaned forward to reach for a beer.

As he stretched across her, she put her hand on his arm, and he looked up, his eyes a brilliant blue.

"Thank you, Josh," she said.

"You're welcome." He hesitated for a

fraction of a second, then closed his eyes and bent to kiss her.

His lips were cool against her mouth, and he made no attempt to deepen the kiss. Instinctively she moved her lips against his, but even as she did so, he drew sharply away.

"My stomach has just switched over from passive rumbling to active protest," he said, unwrapping a ham sandwich, a charming smile on his face. "If you want your fair share of this gourmet feast, you'd better eat fast."

She followed his lead, acting as if the brief kiss had never happened. The rest of the afternoon passed quickly, filled with the routine chores of sailing. By the time they arrived back at the marina, she was almost convinced that she had imagined the quick flare of guilt she had seen in Joshua's eyes just before he kissed her.



Back at the cottage, she showered and changed, then went downstairs to the kitchen.

Joshua was already there, haphazardly opening and shutting cupboards.

"I'm here," she said. "Can I help?"

He pulled his head out of a cupboard and triumphantly waved a can of chili powder. "Found it!"

She gestured to the piles of food arrayed on the counter. "What have you decided to make for dinner?"

He gave a faint grin. "I was making a halfhearted attempt at tacos, but I don't think I've gotten very far. I already know you're loaded with brains and beauty. Do you, by any miracle, also know how to cook?"

"You're in luck. I'd say tacos are just about within my capability."

He gave an exaggerated sigh of relief. "That's fabulous news. Until you came down, I was beginning to think it would be TV dinners. Most of the women I meet nowadays seem to have decided that

cooking is definitely a man's job."

She smiled. "Why don't you take cooking lessons, for heaven's sake?"

"I'm holding out until I get married. I'm afraid that if I learn to cook while I'm still a bachelor, I'll never know if my wife has married me for my lovable personality or just for my cooking."

She opened a can of tomato paste, aware that her heart was beating unusually fast. "Would it compromise your principles too much if I asked you to set the table?"

He grinned lazily. "I'll do it right away. I'll open the wine, too. Once I'm safely away from the stove, I'm amazingly domesticated."

Dinner was a relaxed and enjoyable meal. Joshua was extravagant in his praise of her tacos, and conversation flowed easily between them. It was after ten o'clock when they carried their coffee into the living room and sat down on the sofa in front of the fireplace.

Cathryn had the vague impression that Joshua was restless, on edge, but she couldn't pin her feeling down, and she lacked the energy to define her impression more clearly. He got up and selected a tape, then stood in front of the fireplace instead of returning to her side.

The lush sounds of Tchaikovsky's first piano concerto filled the room, and Cathryn drifted into a pleasant state somewhere between waking and sleeping.

She was jerked abruptly back into wakefulness by the sound of Joshua's voice. "Do you think you could ever fall in love again?" he asked harshly. "Really in love, I mean. The way you were with Robert?"

She was stunned by his question and obscurely hurt by his curt tone. "No," she said vehemently. "I could never, ever love anybody the way I loved Robert."

"Have you considered the possibility of getting married again?" he asked.

"No, I'm not planning to marry again. I just told you I could never fall in love a second time."

"Love and marriage don't necessarily go together," he said. "except in the song. Maybe you'll never fall madly in love again, but don't you want children of your own? Wouldn't you like to have a companion to share your life with as you get older?"

"Yes! But I can't have those things now, and I'll learn to live without them."

"It seems an unnecessary sacrifice."

"Surely that ought to be my own decision? Why are we having this discussion, Joshua? You're thirty-four years old and a bachelor. If you're so all-fired enthusiastic about the institution, why haven't you married?"

"Maybe I never met the right woman."

"What's the problem?" she taunted.

"Are you waiting to find true love?"

He ignored her sarcastic outburst.

"There's another thing," he said quietly.

"What about sex?"

"It's possible to live without sex," she said icily.

"But not for you," he said. "You're a passionate woman, Cathryn, and sooner or later your physical needs are going to get to you."

"You sound like a doctor prescribing vitamin pills." She didn't try to hide the bitterness in her voice. "If you think this is a novel way to talk a grieving widow into bed, let me assure you that you're wrong. Every man who takes me on a date nobly volunteers to save me from the health hazards of sexual abstinence. Well, thanks, but I'm doing just fine."

"If I wanted you in my bed, I wouldn't have to talk you there."

She could feel sparks flash in her eyes.

"You're not only a fool," she said, her voice tight with anger, "you're also an arrogant fool. What makes you think anything you'd do could get me into your

bed?"

"Several things," he said coolly. "But chiefly this."

She had no chance to move away as he grasped her shoulders, pulling her roughly toward him. Then his mouth came down on hers in a hard, ruthless kiss.

Immediately, she felt a quick, sharp jolt of pleasure, then panic at the way her body so readily betrayed her. She murmured a desperate rejection against his lips, and his touch immediately softened into a seductive, bewildering tenderness. She went limp in his arms, and for an aching, pleasure-filled moment, she felt the hard, uncontrolled thrust of his hips. His kiss deepened aggressively and she responded fiercely to the hunger she sensed in his touch. His hands stroked over her breasts. Then with a sudden shuddering breath, he pulled away, turning his back on her as he struggled visibly for self-control.

"I'm sorry," he said brusquely, turning to face her. "I shouldn't have done that. I've always despised men who exploit a sexual attraction to win points in an argument."

"Is that what you were doing?" she asked harshly.

He ran a hand distractedly through his hair. "Maybe. Something like that, at any rate. I'm sorry." He reached out to touch her, then quickly shoved his hands into his pockets. "Cathy, I can't remember when I last enjoyed a woman's company as much as I've enjoyed yours. I think we were on the way to becoming good friends until I blew it just now. Please forgive me. Are—are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she said, knowing even as she spoke that she was lying. She wasn't fine at all. She was burning up with frustration because she wanted Joshua to make love to her, and she knew he wasn't going to.

She smiled brightly as she stood.

"Well, I guess it's time to say good night." At the sound of false cheerfulness in her voice, she cringed inwardly.

"Mmmm. It is late. Sleep well, Cathy." She saw the unmistakable flash of desire burn hotly in the depths of his gaze, but he closed his eyes for a moment or two, and when he opened them again they contained nothing more than the glow of casual friendliness.

"See you tomorrow," he said. "I'm looking forward to another great day."

"You aren't..." She swallowed painfully. "Aren't you coming upstairs?"

"No, I'll wait awhile. But you go ahead."

"Well good night, then." She was afraid that if she stayed any longer she might say something she regretted, so she left in a hurry. For a while, she stood in the empty hallway. After a few seconds, not knowing herself quite what she'd been waiting for, she gave an impatient shrug and went slowly upstairs to bed.

They were walking along the beach the next morning, looking for shells, when Cathryn heard the sounds of a car driving fast up the road toward the cottage. She shaded her eyes against the sun and saw a sleek gray Porsche come to a halt next to Joshua's red Corvette.

She turned to make some comment to Joshua, but the words died unspoken on her lips. He was staring at the Porsche, and the inner torment she had glimpsed so many times was plainly revealed.

Cathryn made some small, involuntary sound and he immediately bent over, ostensibly to pick up a shell. When he stood up again, his familiar mask was in place.

"That's my stepmother's car," he said. "Maybe we should go back to the house and say hello."

"Is something wrong, Joshua?" she asked quietly as they headed back to the

cottage.

"Wrong?" He smiled. "I'd say everything's terrific. My stepmother has to be the world's best cook. She was a domestic science major in college, specializing in *haute cuisine*. I suggest we threaten her with a fate worse than death unless she promises to make lunch for us."

Cathryn noted the peculiar flatness of his tone, and her curiosity increased. Perhaps he disapproved of his father marrying again. "How long ago did your father remarry?" she asked.

"Less than a year." He paused for a moment, then added, "I didn't meet her until a couple of days before the wedding and we haven't had much chance to get acquainted since. I travel so much on company business."

She had no chance to ask him anything further, even if she could have thought of a tactful question. A beautiful young woman with blonde hair and big blue eyes was waiting at the kitchen door, and as soon as she saw Joshua, she waved enthusiastically and hurried across the grass. Her steps appeared to falter for a split second when she realized that he wasn't alone.

"Hello, Joshua. How are you?" she asked.

"Hello, Danielle." Joshua's response sounded cool, and Cathryn heard the underlying note of strain. Suddenly she felt his arm curve affectionately around her shoulders. She stiffened, rejecting the false impression of intimacy, but his grip tightened.

"This is Cathryn Bracken," he said, not quite meeting his stepmother's eyes. "She's a...special friend of mine. Cathryn, my stepmother, Danielle Hunt."

"Hello," Cathryn said, wondering what was going on.

Danielle's huge blue eyes seemed

momentarily sad as she turned toward Cathryn, but her smile never wavered.

"I'm sorry for intruding on your weekend," Danielle murmured. "My husband had to go away on business, and I drove out here on impulse. I had no idea Joshua would be... entertaining."

They trooped into the kitchen, and Cathryn looked around somewhat guiltily. Their breakfast dishes were heaped untidily in the sink.

"I'm sorry," she told Danielle. "Joshua and I went out as soon as we'd eaten breakfast. I hadn't realized we left the kitchen looking such a mess."

"It's no problem at all. I'll clean it up while I make lunch—unless you have something special planned."

"Oh, no, nothing at all. Anyway, I wouldn't dare to compete with you! Joshua's already told me what a super cook you are."

Danielle blushed. "Oh, I'm not that good."

As she was speaking, she opened the refrigerator. "How about a lobster salad? Honestly, Joshua, you always bring enough food to feed an army!"

Cathryn smiled. "And to think I was going to make grilled cheese sandwiches. Joshua was complaining that he never meets a woman nowadays who knows how to cook. He obviously wasn't including you on his list!"

"It's a new twist on the wicked stepmother story, isn't it?" Joshua interjected with a harsh laugh. "A man who can't find a date to live up to his stepmother."

He came and stood behind Cathryn, resting his hands lightly on her shoulders. "If you don't need our help, Danielle, I'd like to take Cathryn into the village before lunch. It's very picturesque, and she hasn't seen it." He allowed his fingers to trail down Cathryn's body in a suggestive caress. "We've been too busy to leave the house," he added.

His stepmother paled. "No, of course I don't need either of you." She drew in a deep breath. "Go ahead and take Cathryn to the village."

As soon as they were in the car, backing out of the narrow driveway, Joshua turned to Cathryn. "I'm sorry about that," he said. His hands were clenched tightly on the steering wheel. "I'm afraid you got caught in the cross fire between my stepmother and me."

She studied the hard angles of his profile. "Why did you pretend to your stepmother that we were lovers?" she asked bluntly.

Dark color ran along his cheeks beneath his tan. "I guess I owe you another apology," he said. "Oh, hell, I suppose the truth of it is that I had some hare-brained scheme lurking in the back of my mind. I want to get an apartment of my own," he said abruptly, "but it's proving ridiculously difficult to leave home. My father and I have always been good friends, but unfortunately we've had some pretty fierce disagreements recently about the business. It's a bad time for me to announce that I'm moving out. I thought that if Danielle... if my father believed I was seriously involved with you, it might make it easier to move out of the house without causing hurt feelings all around."

"I see." A sudden vivid image of herself in bed with Joshua flashed into her mind. She stared at her hands, clenched into a tight ball in her lap. "I guess it's no big deal."

He covered her hands briefly with his own. "Thanks, Cathy."

When they arrived back at the cottage two hours later, Danielle had lunch on the table. The food was absolutely delicious, and Cathryn was fervent in her praise. Nevertheless, she didn't enjoy the meal. She was painfully conscious of undercurrents swirling around her that she didn't

fully understand. To make matters even more difficult, Danielle seemed to have no ability to talk about the world outside her home. Cathryn couldn't help contrasting the dull talk around this table with the easy, free-flowing conversations she and Joshua had enjoyed in the past.

She was more than a little surprised that Joshua made no effort to introduce more interesting topics, but he seemed to hold himself deliberately aloof from the conversation. By the end of the meal it was obvious that Danielle was miserable and Joshua very much on edge.

Cathryn insisted on clearing away all the luncheon dishes, politely refusing Danielle's offer of help, saying the washing up was the least she could do as her contribution to a fabulous meal. In fact, she was glad to escape to the peaceful solitude of the kitchen.

She took as long as she could over the dishes. When she returned to the living room, she found Joshua and Danielle sitting at the opposite ends of the room, and she was sure she had interrupted an angry exchange of words. Danielle seemed to be close to tears, and she refused Cathryn's offer of coffee, saying that she needed to get back home.

"Nathan is going to his college reunion next weekend," she said, "but I think I'll be coming back here. Will you . . . er . . . do you plan to spend next weekend here?"

"No, Cathy and I have other plans for next weekend. So you'll have the cottage all to yourself."

Danielle flinched at his curtness. She stood and turned toward Cathryn. "Well, good-bye, Cathryn. It's been very nice meeting you." Danielle smiled faintly as she picked up her purse and walked to the door. "Don't bother to come out, either of you. It's too hot to stand around saying good-bye."

When the sound of the Porsche's engine had faded into the distance,

Cathryn turned to look at Joshua. "Your stepmother seems a little unhappy," she said quietly.

"My father is twenty-five years older than she is," he said tersely. "He traveled constantly for the first five months of their marriage. I guess things between them got off to a rocky start."

"She's very pretty," Cathryn said.

"Is she?" Joshua shrugged. "Why are we talking about my stepmother? It's bad enough that she interrupted our weekend." He glanced at his watch. "You know, we ate lunch so late that it's almost time to leave. It'll take us close to an hour to clean up here, so it'll be nine o'clock before we're back in the city."

"You're right. We should be getting ready to leave. What would you like me to do?"

Joshua had the chores for closing the cottage reduced to a highly efficient routine. They worked easily together, their methods of organization obviously similar. A cool evening breeze was picking up by the time the cottage was safely locked up.

Cathryn could smell the sharp tang of seaweed and salt as it blew in from the ocean. She gave a small sigh of relaxation that changed into a quiver of pleasure when Joshua put his arm around her shoulders.

"Thank you, Joshua, for a wonderful weekend."

He looked down at her, his expression unexpectedly tender. "It has been good, hasn't it?" he said as they walked to the car.

The drive to Manhattan seemed almost too short, as Cathryn reveled in the free-flowing exchange of ideas and opinions.

When they arrived at her apartment building, by happy coincidence there was space to squeeze the car right outside the entrance. Although a sign said NO PARKING, Joshua pulled in anyway.

"I'd like to offer you a cool drink," she said as Joshua unlocked the trunk to retrieve her small suitcase, "but I'll understand if you want to leave right away. It's going to take you a couple of hours yet to drive home."

"I would enjoy a cool drink," he said. "It's thirsty work driving in city traffic, and the night's still young."

Her pulses raced with an irrational spurt of anticipation at the thought of being alone with him in her apartment. For some reason, it seemed a more intimate prospect than sharing a beach cottage with him for the weekend.

But once they entered the apartment she got her erratic emotions under control. She put her suitcase in her bedroom and returned to the living room, smiling brightly.

"Well, what can I get you to drink, Joshua? I have some frozen lemonade I could make up fast."

In two quick strides he came over and took her into his arms. He looked down at her with an odd, searching intensity.

"Cathryn, would you marry me?" he asked abruptly.

"Marry you?" she finally managed to say. She pulled out of his embrace. "But we hardly know each other!"

"Do you really think that's important?" he said quietly. "Cathryn, we're not teenagers. We've both learned to sum people up quickly—it's a requirement of our jobs. We've talked enough to know that our outlook on life is similar. We enjoy each other's company. We're both very involved in our jobs, and I think that's an important factor. But we're lucky enough to have different fields of expertise, so we're not likely to become rivals."

She was irrationally chilled by his summation of the practical advantages of their marriage. "I think you may have a wrong impression of me," she said. "It's

true that I've always been interested in my work, and recently I've been pretty much dedicated to my career. But after Robert died, work was all I had left. As I told you, I have no plans to marry again, but if I do, I want to have a family quite soon. I'm already twenty-eight, and I'd like to have two children, maybe three, and I'm sure I'd want to stay home with them for three or four years at least. I imagine you would like to marry a woman who's really involved with her career, not somebody who's secretly longing to have a baby."

"Are you longing to have a baby, Cathryn?" he asked.

She flushed, angry at the unconscious self-betrayal. "I was talking in general terms about the sort of wife you probably want. It seems to me that you're looking for a dedicated career woman."

"Not at all. You can accuse me of being a chauvinist if you like, but I can't quite shake the old-fashioned conviction that babies probably do better if their mother doesn't work full-time. Of course I realize that in lots of families both parents need to work for financial reasons, but that wouldn't be the case for us."

Cathryn felt her hackles rise. "I don't see why you assume it should be me who gives up my career just because I'm a woman. Why can't you stay home with the children?"

He suddenly raked his hands through his hair, laughing softly. "I must say, I'm delighted at the rapid progress we're making. Here we are, already arguing about who's going to take care of our children? Do I take it you've agreed we should get married?"

"Joshua, this conversation is crazy!" she exclaimed. "Fifteen minutes ago we hadn't even arranged our next date. Now we're discussing child-care arrangements for our future family! I can't marry you, Joshua. Of course I can't. You . . . I . . . we're not even in love."

"I wasn't going to tell you this," he said, "knowing how you still feel about Robert." He jammed his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "I... love you, Cathryn. I think I fell in love with you the first time we met. I very badly want to marry you."

His voice was thick, almost harsh, by the time he finished speaking. He didn't sound much like the way a man in love was supposed to sound, but Cathryn wasn't upset by his evident embarrassment. She felt sure she understood the reason for his uneasiness. It couldn't be easy for Joshua to declare his love so openly. Not many men would have the courage to reveal their deepest, innermost feelings to a woman who insisted she was still in love with her first husband. Cathryn quickly amended her thought. She didn't just claim to be in love with Robert; she *was* in love with him. Her love for him remained as strong and as enduring as it had ever been.

"Joshua, I do like you," she said tentatively. "I'm attracted to you physically..."

"But you could never love me, is that what you want to say?"

"Yes."

His shoulders slumped, and for a moment she had the extraordinary impression that he was actually relieved. Then she dismissed the thought. They were both so strung out by this discussion that she was beginning to read nuances into it that simply weren't there.

He pulled her into his arms. "Isn't my love enough for both of us, Cathryn? If I love you..." He stumbled to a halt, then tried again. "Now that I've told you how much I love you, your moral scruples are taken care of. You admit that you like me. Surely a marriage between us could work out as long as you like me and I'm... and I'm deeply in love with you?"

"Oh, Josh, I don't know. I just don't

know!"

Unable to disguise the uncertainty in her voice, she realized that they both knew her resistance to the idea of marriage was weakening. The emptiness of her life suddenly overwhelmed her. Would it be so wrong to marry him? He would be such a marvelous companion... a good father... a wonderful lover; maybe love wasn't necessary.

"Please say yes, Cathy." Joshua's voice throbbed with husky persuasiveness. "I want you for my wife." His voice deepened. "Most of all, I want you to share my bed."

She was certain that her cheeks turned bright scarlet. She stirred uneasily in his arms. "That's another thing, Joshua," she murmured breathlessly. "How can you say that you want to marry me when we've never..."

Joshua's laughter sounded rich with genuine amusement.

"I have no doubts on how we would be together, and you don't either, do you?" Then he leaned toward her and kissed her with tantalizing, lingering expertise. She clung to him, her fingers wound shamelessly into his hair.

His gaze was warm as it skimmed over her passion-blurred eyes. She couldn't help smiling, although her voice was a little husky as she admitted the truth. "We both know I practically go up in flames every time you touch me."

His expression suddenly became more serious, and he sighed. "I know it. And I want you, Cathy, every bit as much as you want me. You must know that already. Please say you'll have me," he whispered seductively in her ear. "Let's make a home together, Cathryn, and put the past behind us. It will be a fresh start for both of us. We can make it work, I know we can."

Somewhere in the haze of her pleasure, a tiny alarm sounded. Slowly, reluctantly,

she pulled herself out of his embrace. "Joshua, you aren't using marriage as a convenient excuse for leaving your father's house, are you?"

"Well, things are difficult at my father's house; but, that isn't why I asked you to marry me. Marriage would seem rather a drastic remedy to a temporary problem like that, don't you think?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "I guess that was a pretty dumb suggestion to make."

"Don't worry about it," he laughed. "Now that you know I'm not proposing marriage simply as an alternative to a weekend spent apartment hunting, do you accept my proposal?"

"No...yes...oh heavens, I don't know," she said. "Joshua, I'm working in North Carolina all next week. Can I give you my answer next weekend?"

"If you're sure you can't give it to me any sooner."

Before she could reply, their conversation was interrupted by the buzz of the intercom. The doorman announced that the police were making rounds, towing away any vehicle left in a no parking zone.

"You'd better go," she told Joshua.

"I guess so." He grinned ruefully. "Although it's frustrating to think that a discussion of my life's destiny is being cut short by a traffic cop." He dropped a quick kiss on her parted lips. "What time will you be back from North Carolina?"

"My flight lands at five-thirty on Friday evening."

"I'll be waiting on your doorstep by six o'clock." He pressed another kiss against her cheek. "Take care, Cathy," he said. Then he was gone. She started blankly at the door for several seconds. It suddenly seemed a long time until Friday.

Cathryn couldn't help it. Although she had to work long and hard in North Carolina, several times a day she would

catch herself staring dreamily into the distance, thinking about Joshua. Long before the middle of the week, she had no doubt what her answer to him would be. Only some lingering remnant of pride prevented her from picking up the phone and telling him she was willing to marry him.

Despite her pleasant daydreams about their future together, she only realized precisely how much she wanted to marry Joshua when she returned to her apartment on Friday evening. As she got into the elevator, she felt a flicker of fear. What if he had had second thoughts?

The elevator came to a halt and almost reluctantly she stepped into the corridor. Her heart leaped when she saw Joshua was already there waiting. Propped up on one side of him was an enormous bouquet of red roses. On his other side was a magnum of champagne.

"Hi," Cathryn said, feeling ridiculously breathless as he swept her into his arms. "Oh, Josh, I've missed you this week! Let's get married soon."

"It can't be too soon for me," he said. He kissed her deeply, showing all the hungry passion she had yearned for. The force of his embrace pushed her back against the corridor wall, and she pressed tightly against him, reveling in the hot strength of his body. Robert had never made her feel like this, she thought.

As soon as she realized the significance of her thoughts, she was horrified. In a convulsive movement of rejection she tore herself out of Joshua's arms.

For several seconds they stared at each other in tense silence, then Joshua spoke quietly. "What is it, Cathy?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all." She nervously smoothed her hair. "It's just that we're standing out here in the hallway. Why don't we go into my apartment?"

He picked up the roses and handed them to her, then bent and dropped a tiny

passionless kiss on her mouth. "Everything will work out, Cathy, you'll see."

Once inside her apartment, he opened the champagne while she found a vase big enough for the huge bouquet.

"The last time I had champagne was on my honeymoon," she said as she sat on the sofa.

"I know," he said quietly. "Don't you remember? You told me it made you hiccup."

"No, I don't remember telling you that."

Her body still trembled from his kisses and she was angry with him because his skill as a lover had made her betray Robert's memory. She felt an irrational urge to torment him with the knowledge that Robert had been her first lover, that she would always love him. "Anyway, we didn't need champagne to help us celebrate," she said. "We only took a couple of sips. Just being with Robert was always enough to make me feel high."

"You have some wonderful memories to treasure for the rest of your life," he said.

She was too angry to pay much attention to the careful neutrality of his voice. Didn't he *care* that she kept saying she was in love with another man?

But his face showed no trace of jealousy as he offered her a glass of champagne.

"If you find that you still don't like champagne, we'll have something else," he said. "But I thought your taste might have changed in the last eighteen months." He smiled slightly. "Here's to our golden wedding anniversary," he added, raising his glass.

His smile worked its usual devastating magic, and Cathryn's desire to lash out at him faded away. She took an experimental sip of the champagne, waiting for a hiccup that never came. She sipped again, with increasing enjoyment, and didn't protest when he offered her more.

Joshua sat down next to her on the sofa and rested his arm companionably around her shoulders. "When are we going to get married?" he asked. "Do you want a big ceremony with all your family and friends in attendance?"

"Not unless you do." She looked away from him, taking a large gulp of champagne as she tried to drown out the vivid images of her wedding to Robert—the local church decked out with autumn flowers; her sister, Beth, in her bronze silk dress as matron-of-honor; her mother and grandmother smiling as she walked down the aisle on her father's arm. Oh, Robert, she cried silently, I really did love you.

But aloud she said, "I would prefer a small, informal ceremony. Would you mind that very much?"

"I'd prefer it," he replied briefly. He turned her around to face him. "How about next Saturday?" he asked softly.

"Next Saturday!" she exclaimed. "Heavens, it takes my mother a week to organize a family barbecue. It'll take her at least two months to plan a wedding!"

"I expect you're underestimating her willingness to fall in with our plans," he said. "We can get married in my father's house. Danielle could organize the sort of simple wedding we want on a day's notice."

"Joshua, I'm scared," Cathryn said suddenly.

"Don't be. I'm going to make this marriage work, I promise you." The kiss he gave her was harder than she expected, and his words, when she thought about them, weren't entirely reassuring. He drew away from her and walked quickly toward the phone.

"What we have to do right now is tell both our families about our plans," he said. "I think they might need a full week to get used to the idea of our marriage."

"I think I need a bit longer than a

week." Her attempt at laughter was distinctly shaky.

The hardness around his eyes dissolved into a grin. "Cathy, by the end of the week you'll be wondering why we waited so long! You know what the last few days before a wedding are like."

"Yes," she agreed.

"Cathy, face facts. It's never going to be easy to accept that your marriage to Robert is over. Waiting isn't going to change that; it will only give you longer to worry."

She knew what he said was true, but she still didn't want to hear him say it. How had he known she was thinking about the hectic week before her first marriage?

"I suppose you're right," she said stiffly.

"I've just had a great idea," he said. "After I've called my father, why don't we drive to your parents' place in Pennsylvania and give them the news in person? I'd like to meet them before the ceremony, and this is the only chance we'll have."

Introducing Joshua to her family would invest the whole idea of their marriage with a stark reality it now lacked, and that, she realized, was probably why he had made the suggestion. On the other hand, she had no desire to spend the evening alone with him. If she was mentally unprepared to announce the news to her parents, she was even less prepared at this precise moment to deal with her passionate response to his lovemaking.

"My parents would like that," she said finally.

When Cathryn told her parents she was soon to be married, her mother cried soft, silent tears of happiness, and even her father's voice was suspiciously gruff as he offered his congratulations. Despite the lateness of the hour, her sister, Beth, and Beth's husband were summoned to hear

the exciting news, and they came over to join gleefully in the impromptu celebration.

Joshua fitted so smoothly into the family circle that within an hour of their arrival, Mrs. Green announced that she felt as if she had known him forever. As for Cathryn's father and brother-in-law, once they learned that Joshua was a long-time Pirates fan, his place in their hearts was assured. Cathryn's parents insisted that they spend the night, as she had known they would.

It was after midnight when Beth and her husband left for their own house; it was almost two in the morning when Joshua put his arm around Cathryn and said gently, "You'll fall asleep in the chair if we don't get you upstairs soon."

Her parents were immediately all fond concern. "We were so interested in all your plans, we never thought what a hard week you've both had," Mrs. Green said. "Your bedroom's all ready for you, Cathryn. And you can sleep in Beth's old room, Joshua."

Cathryn and Joshua went upstairs together, and she took him into Beth's old room. Joshua turned on the bedside lamp, then gathered her into his arms. "You have shadows under your eyes," he said. "They make you look even more beautiful than usual."

"That sounds a bit unlikely," she said breathlessly. Her pulse was racing, her whole body alive to his touch.

He brushed his mouth across her parted lips, but when she stirred against him, he held her firmly away. "Cathy, don't! I only have so much will power. It's frustrating as hell for both of us, but you know we can't sleep together here; it would be a betrayal of your parents' hospitality, a betrayal of their trust. Cathy..." His breathing was suddenly as ragged as hers, but he propelled her firmly toward the door. "I'll see you

tomorrow," she said. "Good night, Cathy."

They left late the next morning. The good wishes and fond good-byes of her parents echoed in Cathryn's ears as they drove along the turnpike toward Manhattan.

Joshua drove through the heavy traffic with total concentration, always slightly above the speed limit, as if he was anxious to get back to the city. His expression was remote, although Cathryn couldn't think why their visit to her family should cause him any lingering tension. He had breezed through all the meetings with his usual devastating charm.

When they were three blocks away from her apartment building, Joshua turned into a parking garage.

"I hope you don't mind walking a couple of blocks," he said, not really consulting her. "This time I don't plan to be interrupted by a traffic cop."

Cathryn swallowed the lump in her throat. "I don't mind walking."

She understood; he was telling her that he intended to make love to her.

When they finally entered her apartment, she was not quite sure whether she felt relief or resignation.

"Well, home at last." She laughed nervously.

"Yes. The trip took longer than I'd expected," he said as he took her in his arms.

Cathryn felt as awkward as a teenager on her first heavy date. Her body hovered somewhere between nervous anticipation and total numbness.

In some dark corner of her mind she registered the fact that his mouth was grim and unsmiling as he bent to capture her lips, but the sensuous, animal heat of his body told her precisely how much he desired her, and she surrendered to his embrace with a helpless shiver of longing.

Under his hands her shirt slid away from her shoulders, leaving her quivering beneath his touch. He wound her hair around his hands, and tipped her head back to kiss her throat and bare, sloping shoulders. His mouth trailed down until it reached the hollow between her breasts. She saw the dark blaze of desire in his eyes and heard the rasp of his indrawn breath, then his arms were around her again, lifting her easily and carrying her into the bedroom.

When they had discarded all their clothes, he stretched out next to her on the bed, and she curled her arms tightly around his neck, instinctively rasping her nails rhythmically along his spine. Their kiss was explosive in its intensity.

She was scarcely aware of the crucial moment when Joshua lifted himself from her side and eased himself on top of her, filling the aching void his lovemaking had already created inside her. She sighed with pleasure, opening her eyes and meeting his gaze.

His blue eyes gleamed with the brilliant sheen of desire as he gazed down into her face.

"I want you, Cathy," he said hoarsely. "My God, I really want you."

Something about his harsh exclamation jarred sufficiently to penetrate the fiery mist of her desire. The magic spell their bodies had been weaving together was shattered. When Joshua bent to recapture her mouth, she jerked her head sharply away.

She knew he must feel the intensity of her sudden rejection, but he made no attempt to reawaken her ardor. He placed his hands on either side of her face, pulling her mouth roughly around to receive his kiss. A few seconds later, it was all over.

Joshua rolled away from her, and Cathryn lay on her back, staring up at the ceiling.

She was still staring at the ceiling when Joshua spoke. "Thank you, Cathryn, I... enjoyed... making love to you."

She bit her lip to keep from crying. He'd used much the same tone when he'd thanked her for doing such a good job on the Consolidated Vision accounts.

"Don't mention it. You're welcome," she replied, not attempting to mask the irony in her voice.

But Joshua made no further comment, and after the briefest pause, switched the conversation to their schedules for the next week.

"I have to make a quick trip to Los Angeles," he told her. "But I'll be back Thursday. If you'll see about your blood test, I'll make all the other legal arrangements for our wedding. My secretary will call you if there are any unexpected problems."

"I'll be at the main office in Manhattan," she said politely. "It's my first in-town assignment in three months."

"Well, that's very convenient."

Cathryn turned her head, just in time to conceal two small tears that slid down her cheeks.

Joshua got out of bed and dressed. "Well, it's getting late, so I guess I should be making tracks for Connecticut. I have a breakfast meeting tomorrow morning."

Cathryn wondered if he was as eager to leave as she was to have him go. "Would you like anything to eat or drink?" she asked as she rose also, pulling on a robe. She followed him out of the room.

"No, thanks." He hesitated at the door, then turned abruptly and cupped her face in his hands. "I'm sorry, Cathy," he whispered. "But don't give up on us now. Things will work out. Trust me."

She closed her eyes, resisting the soft, melting feeling his words produced in her heart.

"I'll call you when I get back from L.A.," he said. He appeared to hesitate

on the brink of telling her something more, but then he gave her a swift kiss and left the apartment.

It was only several minutes later that she finally managed to pinpoint what it was that troubled her most about the disastrous evening. First of all, Joshua had never once said that he loved her. For a man who claimed to have fallen in love at first sight, it seemed a strange omission.

But even more troubling was the moment when Joshua had murmured that he wanted her. However many times she replayed the scene in her mind, she could still hear a note of absolute astonishment throbbing in his low voice. It was as if he had never expected to feel intense, overwhelming desire for her. She couldn't shake the strange conviction that Joshua had actually been relieved when her passionate response to his lovemaking had stopped.

Joshua called on Thursday to explain that his father wanted to hold a bachelor dinner on Friday night. Would Cathryn mind very much if he agreed, although it would mean that they wouldn't see each other again until the day of their wedding?

Cathryn gave a light laugh and said that they had the rest of their lives ahead of them, so why would she care about a single evening apart?

The fact was, Catherine was so busy making arrangements that she barely had time to miss Joshua, barely had time to think.

All too soon, the day of the wedding arrived. Danielle had turned the spacious living room of the Hunt house into a bower of summer flowers, and Judge Burris, an old friend of Joshua's father, performed the simple ceremony. From the moment Cathryn stepped into their house, Joshua and his father both ap-

peared to be all smiles, while her own family seemed to beam with equal happiness.

A buffet luncheon followed the brief ceremony, and everybody agreed that Danielle Hunt had simply surpassed herself with the meal. She had even baked and decorated a wedding cake, an incredible concoction that looked like a castle from a fairy tale and tasted as light as a soufflé.

Cathryn observed all the proceedings from behind a merciful haze that effectively separated her from the good-humored chatter of the other participants. Once she had noticed Joshua's stepmother, however, Danielle's distress became rapidly apparent.

She wasn't sure when her self-absorption began to decrease and she first noticed that Danielle was having a hard time pretending to be cheerful. Probably because of all the work she had put in during the preceding week, Danielle looked wan and tired, her usual ethereal prettiness faded to a haunting pallor.

Cathryn determinedly put aside her own problems. "Danielle, I don't know how to thank you," she said. "Everything is fantastic! The rooms look beautiful; the wedding cake is exquisite, and the food is all delicious."

"Th-thank you." Danielle's pale cheeks seemed to turn even whiter. She put her hand to her head, seeming to sway on her feet, and suddenly Joshua was there, his hand around his stepmother's waist, supporting her.

"Are you all right, Danielle?" he asked.

At that moment, Mr. Hunt arrived. "What is it, Danny? Are you feeling sick again?"

"She's obviously faint," Joshua said, his voice unnaturally curt. "Cathryn, could you go upstairs with her? It's almost time for us to leave, so you could

change into your traveling clothes while you're up there."

"Yes, of course. Danielle, why don't you lean on my arm?"

Danielle didn't protest when Cathryn guided her upstairs.

Once at her room, Danielle said, "I'll be fine now." She turned away, not meeting Cathryn's eyes. "Thank you. I'm...sorry about...about everything."

"I'm the one who should apologize, for heaven's sake! Joshua insisted that you'd have no problems organizing the wedding, and I didn't stop to think how burdensome you might find it all," Cathryn said.

Danielle clutched her throat in a panic-stricken gesture. "I'm going to lie down," she gasped. "I'll see you...when you get back from your honeymoon." She opened the door to her bedroom and fled inside.

Joshua appeared a moment later. "Your case is in my bedroom," he said. "Do you remember where that is?"

"Yes, I know." She intended to move, but her body didn't seem able to obey her command. Joshua seemed like a total stranger.

"I'm just going to check on Danielle," he said finally. "I want to make sure she's feeling all right."

"Yes, that would be kind."

He tapped on Danielle's door and Cathryn turned and walked down the corridor. By the time she reached the end of the hallway, Joshua was already inside his stepmother's room.

They flew to San Francisco after a noisy, high-spirited sendoff from her family and an affectionate embrace from Joshua's father. Danielle remained in her room.

Cathryn was grateful for the innate tactfulness that had caused Joshua to

choose San Francisco for their honeymoon. There would be no tropical beaches to remind her of the past.

Their hotel suite was attractive and comfortable. It was amazing how much could be organized in a week, Cathryn thought. It had taken nearly six months to plan her wedding to Robert. She swallowed a sudden lump in her throat.

As soon as the porter left, Joshua took her into his arms and kissed the tip of her nose. "Welcome to San Francisco, Mrs. Hunt," he said softly. "Do you mind if I tell you that you looked incredibly beautiful today?"

"I don't mind," she whispered breathlessly. "You looked quite handsome yourself, you know."

He bent his head and kissed her quickly on the mouth, drawing away before her response became too passionate.

Suddenly the air between them seemed weighted with significance—a few inches of space that yawned as wide as a mountain chasm. Cathryn felt she could hardly breathe. She lifted her hand to her throat, and the tiny movement was enough to ignite the blaze that was waiting to consume them both. The clear blue of Joshua's eyes turned to a smoky gray, and his mouth came over hers like an explosion propelling them both onto the bed.

"I want you," he murmured against her mouth. "I want you so much that it hurts. I want to possess your lips, your breasts... all of you. I want to make love to you until your body is on fire for me—only for me."

"I want you too," she whispered harshly.

When their clothes lay in a heap at the foot of the bed, his gaze traveled hungrily over her. He wasn't even touching her, but already he was making her body tremble with intense, overwhelming need.

"Oh, God, Cathy," he murmured. "Why do you have to be so damn

beautiful?"

"For you," she whispered. "Only for you. So that you'll make love to me. Love me, Joshua. Don't wait."

His expression melted into tenderness. "Believe me, darling, there's no way I could wait any longer."

Darling. The husky caress of the word echoed in her mind. She closed her eyes, wanting to feel nothing except desire, nothing except the heat that fused their two bodies into one perfect whole.

But when their passion was slaked he had no more words of love to give her, although their bodies remained curled together in the middle of the big bed. He touched her cheeks.

"No tears this time," he said softly. "I'm glad." He kissed her passionately swollen lips. "Good night, Cathy."

"Good night, Joshua."

She waited until she was certain he was asleep before she got up and locked herself in the bathroom, where she cried late into the night.

The next day set the pattern for the rest of their honeymoon. They breakfasted late in their room, then set out to view the tourist sights of the city. On subsequent days they drove through the chain of redwood groves along the Redwood Highway and sampled the wine in the vineyards of the Napa Valley.

The instantaneous rapport that had been theirs from the beginning never deserted them. Conversation flowed easily, and Cathryn knew that Joshua derived as much pleasure as she did from the constant exchange of ideas and opinions. There seemed to be only two subjects that were forbidden—they never discussed their feelings for each other, and they never discussed what happened each night in the darkened intimacy of their hotel bedroom.

Joshua gradually confided a lot more

about his professional problems. It was a relief for him, he told Cathryn, simply to have somebody to talk to. He explained that his father had only reluctantly resigned from the presidency of Consolidated Vision when he discovered that Danielle couldn't cope with a husband who was always traveling. He had never relinquished active financial control of the company, however, and Joshua was still struggling to get the power that would match his impressive job title.

For six months he had been fighting to convince his father that the radio and television marketplace had changed drastically over the last five years and that their company needed an equally drastic change in its approach to the market.

"What your father needs is a new interest," Cathryn said as they ate lunch at a bayside restaurant on the last day of their honeymoon. "You know, Danielle is a young woman and your father is only in his early fifties. A baby would be guaranteed to take your dad's mind off his business worries."

There was such a long silence that she was afraid she had offended him.

"Danielle had a miscarriage last February," Joshua said finally. "I think I told you that I met her for the first time on the day she married my father, then they went off for a three-month trip to Europe. When they came back, my father began to travel constantly. He was trying to show everybody he was still actively in charge of the company, even though I'd been running things while he was in Europe. He'd been away for three weeks when Danielle started to miscarry. She had no family in Connecticut, so even though we were virtually strangers, I had to take her to the hospital and hold her hand while she lay in the emergency room losing her baby."

"Why didn't your father come home?"

"We knew he was in Tokyo, but we couldn't reach him for nearly twenty-four hours, and then he couldn't book a flight out. It was more than three days before he finally arrived home. Danielle had to go through that whole rotten experience without her husband."

"She had you. She had her husband a few days later. That's better than having nobody."

Joshua looked up at her at once, a strange expression shadowing his eyes. "You had a miscarriage? You miscarried Robert's baby?"

"Yes." The words came tumbling out, flat and leaden with pain. "Knowing that I was carrying Robert's child was the only thing that kept me going for the first few weeks after he died. I lost our baby just before Christmas." She heard herself laugh and caught the black tinge of bitterness in the sound. "My family didn't know what had happened. When I went home, they thought I was distraught because it was the first Christmas I'd spent without Robert."

"You went through the miscarriage completely *alone*? Why didn't you tell your parents what was going on?"

"They hadn't known I was pregnant, and it seemed the wrong moment to tell them." She looked away, blinking back tears. Eighteen months without a tear, she thought, and since she'd met Joshua she couldn't seem to keep her eyes dry.

"I didn't feel strong enough to cope with my family's grief. I could barely cope with my own."

His hand reached out to cover hers. "I love you, Cathryn," he said. "I'll always be here for you."

She felt an answer trembling in her throat, but no sound emerged. Emotion welled up from deep inside her and turned slowly to desire as they looked at each other across the table.

Joshua reached over and tangled his

hand in her hair, then drew sharply away. "Touching you is more than I can handle right now. Thank God we're not far from the hotel."

Wordlessly they rose from the table and, after Joshua paid the bill, walked outside and hailed a cab.

As soon as they were inside their suite, he took her into his arms, kissing her with a tormented, aching hunger. He pulled her down onto the bed.

"I want you," he said, and the demanding urgency of his voice caused her desire to spiral out of control, sending her conscious thoughts spinning away into the warm, waiting darkness.

Joshua fell asleep almost immediately, and Cathryn curled her body against his, luxuriating in the smooth, muscular feel of him. Moments later, he rolled over onto his stomach, giving an unglamorous little snort that sounded a bit like the snuffling of a baby. At that precise moment Cathryn realized how much she loved him.

She loved him completely and absolutely. Not with the warm, comfortable security of the love she had had for Robert, but with a different and more painful kind of love.

Finally she understood that it was no betrayal of Robert's memory to admit to herself that she could love another man. It was only because she and Robert had shared the carefree happiness of two young lovers that she was now capable of experiencing the richness and depth of her feelings for Joshua. She pressed a soft, silent kiss against his shoulder.

Suddenly Joshua poked out his arm and dropped it around her waist. "Love you," he mumbled.

"I love you too," she said but she knew he didn't hear her. And she wasn't sure she wanted him to.

The end of their honeymoon meant the end of their time together, at least temporarily. As soon as they returned Cathryn was scheduled to stop in at the main office, then go to Michigan for a week-long assignment. Joshua would continue staying at his father's house until Cathryn's return, when he would move into her apartment. But waiting for her at the office was an interoffice memo indicating that she was wanted immediately by Mr. Marlowe, the senior partner of Kingston and Arthur. She tapped on his impressive oak door with considerable trepidation.

He smiled amiably as he greeted her. "Ah, Mrs. Hunt. Good morning. You look very well, radiant in fact. I gather your honeymoon agreed with you?"

"It was wonderful. The only trouble was that it ended much too soon."

His smile merely widened. "Well, I have a small gift to offer you on behalf of the company. We've flown somebody from our Chicago office to Michigan, and he'll take over your assignment. Please take the next week off as an extra vacation."

Surprise and happiness transformed her expression. "Why, thank you, Mr. Marlowe! That's a fantastic wedding gift, the best one you could have given me."

"You've worked hard and extremely efficiently. I'm pleased to have a chance to show my appreciation in a practical way." His intercom buzzed. "Good morning, Mrs. Hunt. Don't take too long leaving or I may find you another assignment."

When she arrived back at her apartment, she reached for the phone, planning to call Joshua and tell him the good news. But she stopped halfway through dialing his office number. Why not go directly to his father's house and surprise him? They could spend a few days together at the Hunt house before trans-

ferring Joshua's belongings. She grabbed her suitcase and headed out to get the train.

It was only mid-afternoon when she got to Joshua's house, and she didn't expect to find him at home. Sure enough, the doorbell was answered by the daily cleaning lady, who said that Mr. Hunt senior and junior were both at work. Mrs. Hunt was at home, however. She was out in the backyard, weeding the vegetable garden.

"Don't disturb Mrs. Hunt," Cathryn said. "I'll go up to Joshua's bedroom and unpack my suitcase. When Mrs. Hunt comes in, would you please let her know that I'm here?"

Cathryn walked quietly up the elegant staircase. She recognized the door to Joshua's room without difficulty.

She was just about to open the door when she heard the murmur of voices, and without conscious thought about what she was doing, Cathryn twisted the handle and quietly eased open the door.

Danielle Hunt was stretched out on the bed, her arms clasped possessively around Joshua's neck, gasping out her undying love for him.

"How could you have married her, Joshua?" she murmured in an agonized whisper.

"Danielle, you're married to my father, for God's sake. Besides, you loved him when you married him. You have to remember those feelings and forget about . . . what happened later."

"You don't love *her*, do you, Joshua?" She clutched feverishly at his jacket. "You only married her because you were desperate to put another barrier between us. That was why you did it, wasn't it?"

Very quietly, Cathryn shut the door. She bent down, picked up her suitcase, and walked back down the stairs.

She stared uncomprehendingly at the front door, then placed her suitcase neatly to one side of the entrance. She turned

around and walked in the opposite direction, weaving slightly, as if she were drunk. When she came to another door barring her path, she pushed it open and found herself in the kitchen.

The cleaning lady was standing at the draining board scraping carrots.

"Mrs. Hunt, are you all right? You look a bit pale, if you don't mind me saying so."

"I'm fine. Terrific." She turned blindly toward the refrigerator and bumped straight into Joshua.

"Cathy! Darling! I spotted your suitcase in the hall but I thought I must be hallucinating." He swept her into his arms. "Mmm . . . I've missed you already."

"Have you?" Her bones felt as if they had turned to steel, she was so unyielding in his arms.

He looked at her strangely when she spoke. "What are you doing here?" he asked. "I thought you were supposed to be away all week."

"Yes, I'm sure you did." She forced herself to appear calm. "Mr. Marlowe, our senior partner, gave me an extra week's vacation," she said as evenly as she could.

"I see."

Even the pretense of calm was suddenly too much for Cathryn. "I'm really tired, Joshua," she said. "I'd like to rest for a while. Shouldn't you be back at the office? What are you doing home?"

"I left some papers in my bedroom. I wasn't sure where I'd put them, or I'd have sent somebody else to pick them up. But you're right, I ought to get back."

"Then I'll see you this evening, I guess."

She hurried out of the kitchen before he could say anything to detain her. She rushed upstairs to his room, hating to enter it knowing that Danielle had been there, but unable to think of where else to

go.

She felt humiliated to the depths of her soul. How could she have missed so many clues as to the true state of Joshua's feelings?

Because he had lied to her. Betrayed her. Suddenly Joshua came in.

"You seemed upset just now. What's wrong?"

He sounded genuinely concerned, and she hated him for his skill at pretending to care for her. He reached out to her, and she jumped away. "Don't touch me," she said. "Don't ever touch me again."

"Why not?" His question was dangerously quiet. "You're my wife and I like touching you."

"As much as you like touching your stepmother?"

He exhaled in a long sigh. "You saw Danielle with me."

"Yes, I saw you. I apologize for not having telephoned in advance to warn everyone I was coming."

His expression was grim. "I'm sorry you found out this way," he said. "I intended telling you the truth the next time we were alone together."

Her heart was shattering into a thousand pieces. "At least I've saved you the trouble of an embarrassing confession. Tell me, Joshua, why did you marry me?"

"For at least a dozen different reasons, most of which I didn't understand at the time. Listen, Cathy, things aren't the way they seem."

"You mean you and your stepmother aren't committing adultery?"

Joshua flinched. "Danielle and I have never had any physical relationship whatsoever," he said.

There was a short, tense pause. "As soon as I... as soon as we realized how we felt about each other, we took care never to be alone."

"How honorable!" Cathryn ground

out, unable to bear his answer now that she had it. "And precisely how did our marriage fit into this cozy little love triangle?"

He looked away. "By the time I married you, my feelings for Danielle had changed."

"Oh sure! I saw this afternoon how your feelings for her had changed." Her short burst of laughter sounded dangerously like a sob. "My God! That weekend by the beach... Danielle expected to find you alone at the cottage, didn't she?"

"Maybe. I don't know. Yes, I guess she did." He took a step toward her.

"Cathy, please listen to me—really listen—while I try to explain what happened. Danielle and I got to know each other under exceptional circumstances. She was married to my father, but because of his constant traveling, she was spending most of her time alone in this house with me. She's pretty and she has a sweet nature; in fact, she's the epitome of traditional feminine virtues."

Cathryn tried for a sophisticated smile. "How frustrating it must have been. I'm surprised you didn't suggest a quick trip to Reno and a convenient divorce."

"I never even considered the possibility of marrying Danielle. Neither of us would ever betray my father."

"What were you doing this afternoon, Joshua? Finding a way to express your loyalty?"

He paled, and she saw him grit his teeth with the effort of keeping his temper. "Danielle came to say a final good-bye, and things got a little out of control."

"Precisely why did you marry me?" she asked with deadly calm.

"When I first met you, I'd already decided that the best way out of the whole horrible mess was for me to get married."

"And I was simply the lucky lady you happened to pick on?"

"Dammit, Cathy, that's not the way it was!" He drew a deep breath. "When I met you, I knew I would never find a more suitable wife or a more perfect companion. It seemed to me that we had a very good chance of being happy together."

"So why did you lie to me?" Her voice faded to a whisper. "When you asked me to marry you, you said you loved me."

"Be honest with yourself, Cathy. We both wanted children. We both wanted to settle down. We like each other. But you wanted to throw away our chance of real happiness because you were in love with a dead man."

"So you lied to me."

"Yes, I lied to you! I lied because I thought you were being unreasonable. You were in love with Robert. I thought I would never love any woman other than Danielle. It seemed to me that we were ideally suited—two people who would never hurt each other because their emotions weren't deeply involved and never would be. So I offered you the word of love you wanted."

"And how do you suppose I feel?"

His expression hardened. "All right, let's discuss your motives. Are you sure they're absolutely crystal pure? I'd say that sexually you were a pretty frustrated woman by the time I came along. Robert may be your one and only true love, but I sure as hell make a great substitute in bed."

"I'm leaving," she shouted.

"Do me a favor, Cathy, and shut up long enough to hear what I'm saying. My relationship with Danielle—such as it was—is over. This whole scene is pointless."

"Pointless! You deceived me. I was honest with you. I told you I was in love with Robert, but you lied to me about Danielle."

"I lied to you in the beginning," he said

slowly, "but by the time we were married, the only person I was deceiving was myself. I wasn't looking for love when I asked you to marry me, but I found it anyway."

Her heart gave a little leap of hope, but she steeled herself against it. "You sound very convincing, Joshua," she said cynically. "But then you always did."

He sat down beside her on the sofa, leaving a tiny space. "I told you this afternoon how it was. I really did believe that I loved Danielle for a while. But since I met you, I've realized that what I felt for her was no more than a shadow of real love. Most of what I was feeling was sympathy. I realize now that if Danielle and I had ever married, we'd have driven each other crazy before we got back from our honeymoon."

Joshua's hand trailed hypnotically up and down her thigh. "Whereas with you..."

"Whereas with me the sexual attraction has outlasted the honeymoon. Hooray!"

"What I feel for you is a hell of a lot more than sexual attraction." He took her hands in his. "Cathy, that first time I kissed you, it seemed like the walls of the motel had collapsed on top of me. I'd never known what it felt like to experience real desire for a woman."

"You certainly hid your feelings effectively. You never even tried to get an invitation into my room."

A smile touched his mouth. "You sound cross that I didn't try to seduce you, Cathy, my love."

"Don't call me that. I'm not your love."

"Yes, you are. My one and only love." He put his arms around her. "I love you, Cathryn."

"Two weeks ago you loved Danielle."

"No. I'd already met you." He laughed without humor. "You know, I even avoided making love to you for as long as

I could stand it. I was afraid of what I might find out about my own feelings."

"Is that why—the first time we made love—you seemed almost relieved when I... when I..."

"Stopped responding? Yes. I wasn't ready to admit that making love to you had knocked my socks off."

"They were already off," she said.

His eyes warmed with laughter. "Oh, Cathy, what I felt for you is so much stronger and more powerful than anything I've ever felt before. Please say you'll give our marriage another chance."

She forced herself to ignore the soft, melting sensation his words evoked. "How do you know your love for me won't disappear overnight? According to you, that's more or less what happened to your feelings for Danielle."

"Once you've really been in love, you can never mistake the feeling again." His eyes were suddenly shadowed with pain. "You loved Robert, so you ought to know

how unmistakable it is."

"Are you jealous, Joshua?" she asked softly.

"Yes, dammit! I'm jealous." His mouth tightened into another grim smile. "Humiliating, isn't it, to be sick with envy of a man who's been dead for nearly two years."

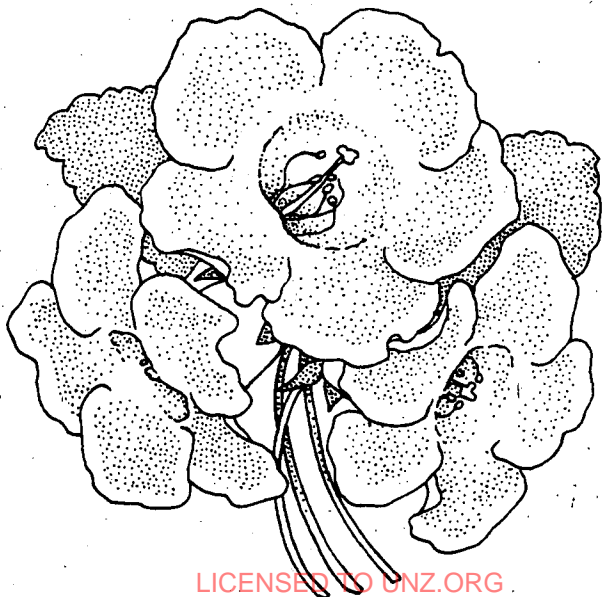
"I'll always love Robert," she said. "But I see now that it doesn't mean I'll never love anybody else. I guess I've learned recently that love can grow."

She sensed the absolute stillness in him. "Cathy, what are you saying?"

"I love you, Joshua," she said. "I love you so much that it hurts."

He pressed his mouth urgently to hers. "Tell me again," he breathed. "Oh, Cathy, I thought I might never hear you say that."

"I want you. I need you. I love you." Then their bodies blazed into life together and the fire consumed them, burning away the last, lingering shadows of doubt. ♥



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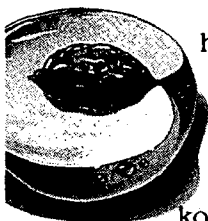
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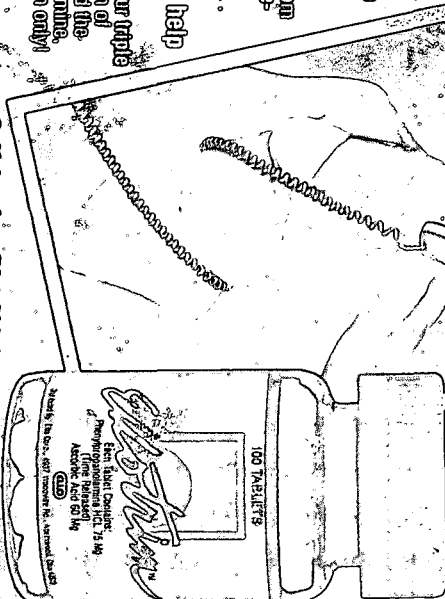
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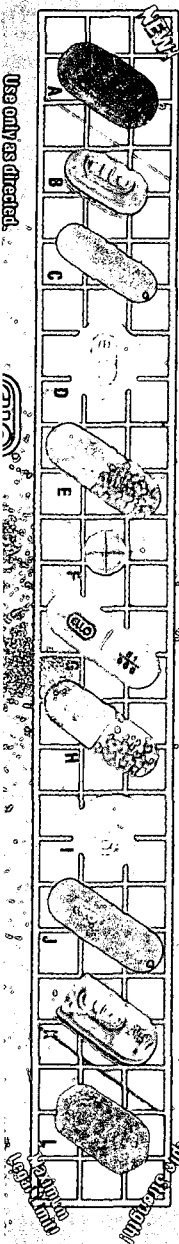
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